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Language and interpretation: A study in East-West comparative poetics

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LANGUAGE AND INTERPRETATION

A Study in East-West Comparative Poetics

A thesis presented

by

Zhang Longxi

to

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Abstract

This is a study of the nature of language and its implications for the interpretation of literature from the vantage point of East-West comparative poetics. Because of the metaphoricity of language, understood not only in the sense that words are etymologically metaphorical, but that all verbal expressions are evocations of things through symbolic representation, the adequacy of language, especially that of writing, has been questioned by philosophers, mystics, and poets in both the East and the West. By discussing Plato, Kant, Schleiermacher, Wittgenstein, Mauthner, Gadamer, Derrida, Laozi, Zhuangzi, and Confucius, I try to ground the specific problems of literary interpretation in philosophical debates on the inadequacy of language. All critiques of language, however, inevitably fall into an ironic pattern in using language to remedy its supposed inadequacy, thereby demonstrating the power of language which lies, again ironically, not so much in explicit expression as in pregnant moments of silence or the suggestiveness of indirect expressions. It is in the use of silence that great poets in Chinese and Western literatures--Shakespeare, T. S. Eliot, Rilke, Mallarmé, Tao Qian, Wang Wei, Li Shangyin, and others--overcome the limitation of language and approach what is unsayable. The suggestiveness of language turns the helpless, passive silence into significant, active silence, and what cannot be said because of the limitation of language

becomes what remains deliberately unsaid to express more than the literal sense of the text. The meaning of a literary text thus extends beyond its boundary, making interpretation ineluctable and inconclusive, inviting the participation of the reader to realize its aesthetic potentials. The effort to confine meaning to the author's intention ultimately proves to be futile, as does the equation of meaning with the reader's subjectivity. Drawing on philosophical hermeneutics, contemporary literary theory, and traditional Chinese poetics, I argue for the fusion of horizons in the study of literature and for an interpretive pluralism that fully recognizes the indeterminacy of meaning, the historicity of all understanding and interpretation, and the openness of both the structure of the literary text and the orientation of hermeneutic activities.

TABLE OF CONTEXTS

PREFACE

The present study of the nature of language and its implications for both the making of literature and its reading has grown out of my sustained interest in hermeneutics, the art of understanding and interpretation. Coming out of the German philosophical tradition, hermeneutics as a term has found its way into the English of the students of theology, law, and literature, and as a theory has come to occupy an essential place in recent decades in the discussion of various branches of human studies. Most of these discussions, however, are concerned with philosophical hermeneutics and confined within limits of the Western tradition alone. This is quite unsatisfactory because understanding and interpretation are more than just philosophical categories designed for a purely theoretical interest; they are the immanent facts of life, they are part and parcel of human existence. "Understanding," as Hans-Georg Gadamer remarks in discussing Martin Heidegger's existential analysis of Dasein, is "the original form of the realization of There-being, which is being-in-the-world. Before any differentiation of understanding into the different directions of pragmatic or theoretical interest, understanding is There-being's mode of being."[1] In other words, the hermeneutic phenomenon is not a theoretical construct, but constitutes the

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[1] Truth and Method, English translation edited by Garrett Barden and John Cumming (New York: Crossroad, 1975), p. 230; hereafter abbreviated as TM.

ontology of human life, for human beings can exist and develop only to the extent that they can understand and work out the relationship between their being and the world in which they find themselves. That relationship of the Self with regard to the Other already constitutes the context in which the hermeneutic problem necessarily arises. Obviously, then, hermeneutics has implications that are truly universal; it is not and cannot be limited to one particular realm of study, to one culture, or to one tradition.

What I propose to do in this study is to discuss hermeneutics in a way that will distinguish it from general or philosophical hermeneutics in two important aspects: (1) it will concentrate on the particular problems in the understanding of literature, that is to say, it will be a specifically _literary_ hermeneutics based on an examination of the relationship between language and literary interpretation; and (2) it will go beyond the boundary of a single tradition to acquire a more extensive view of the hermeneutic problems in the perspective of _East-West comparative studies_. So far, virtually no work has been done in literary hermeneutics that tries to bring the East and the West into mutual illumination; in many respects, therefore, the present study is an attempt to blaze a trail in the difficult but exciting field of East-West comparative poetics. I shall approach the hermeneutic problem by looking into the relationship between language and interpretation as it has been conceived in the Western tradition and in

classical Chinese poetics. This may on the one hand introduce to literary scholars in the West a dimension of hermeneutic theory from a very different cultural context, while on the other hand render a great service to the Chinese tradition by piecing together critical insights and utterances that are scattered over the voluminous writings of Chinese philosophy, poetry, and criticism. In this sense, the present study is also an attempt to suggest a consistent line of hermeneutic thinking in classical Chinese poetics.

Such a study is theoretical in the sense that it is an investigation of the extent to which the inadequacy and suggestiveness of verbal expressions influence both the writing of a literary work and its reading, that it considers both the writing and reading of literature in the context of a communicative process mediated by aesthetic experience, and tries to discover the principles applicable to both literary production and reception. It is also an exercise of practical criticism in that it comes to theoretical conclusions through discussion of a number of literary works embedded in their own cultural traditions. Literary hermeneutics in my understanding is not a set of prescriptive rules or a methodology with which the interpreter is able to solve problems of textual criticism once he has grasped the technicalities and applied them to a particular text. The use of literary hermeneutics lies rather in deepening our perception of the workings of language and our experience of the art of literature; it helps describe

more correctly and perceptively what happens when words and sentences are woven into a literary text, and when they are subsequently reactivated in the process of reading. In the light of such a hermeneutics, we may bring to our conscious reflection those principles that underlie the composition and performance of a literary text, and may thus understand the meaning of a literary work better than its author or the uninformed reader does.

Throughout my discussion, I shall refer to both Western and Chinese sources and put them in a sort of critical dialogue. The justification for such an intercultural dialogue, as I already mentioned, lies in the universality of the hermeneutic problem. Indeed, the Chinese tradition can be quite appropriately characterized as a hermeneutic one, since it is essentially an exegetical tradition evolving around a set of canonical texts and a wealth of commentaries, comparable with that of biblical exegesis which furnishes the cornerstone of the Western hermeneutic tradition. Many of the theoretical problems in reading and commenting on the canon are common to both Chinese and biblical exegetes, and have direct bearing on literary criticism in both traditions. Although the nature of language and its correlation with literary interpretation are gradually understood in a historical process, a study of such correlations in cultures as drastically different as the Chinese and the Western precludes comparisons in a chronological order. Methodologically, therefore, my study will not be

historically oriented but will identify similar themes in the critical understanding that have emerged at various moments in the East and the West. By "themes" I mean certain problems of understanding that are common to both Chinese and Western traditions, certain crucial ideas and concepts concerning the nature of language, its inherent metaphoricity, ambiguity, suggestiveness, its implications for the making and reading of literature, etc. Of course, each of these themes evolves in its own tradition and has its own history, which must not be overlooked when a point of convergence is located, but what contributes to the thematic coherence of this study as well as to an extensive view of literary hermeneutics is not the self-enclosed particularity of each theme, but the theoretical implications beyond its enclosure. My interest in such common themes in critical theory also justifies my disengagement from the technical problem of authorship, which can be a pretty thorny one especially on the Chinese side. Almost all the ancient Chinese works, the Confucian Analects, the books named after Laozi or Zhuangzi, are either compiled by the philosopher's disciples or contain some interpolations or spurious chapters. It is therefore always questionable whether one can speak, say, of the different chapters of the book Zhuangzi as though they come from the same author and represent the ideas and thoughts of the same philosopher. In my discussion, however, I do not distinguish what are generally accepted as the authentic chapters from the spurious ones, since it is not

the authenticity of authorship but the ideas in the book and the actual influence they have exerted in the Chinese tradition that are of concern and relevance here.

In bringing together historically unrelated texts and ideas, I attempt to find a common ground on which Chinese and Western literatures can be understood as commensurable, even though their cultural and historical contexts are different. The ultimate goal of such thematic comparisons is to transcend the limitation of a narrowly defined perspective and to expand our horizon by assimilating as much as possible what appears to be alien and belonging to the Other. If the encounter with something alien and unfamiliar is where hermeneutics starts, the enrichment of experience and knowledge in a mutual engagement of the Self and the Other, or what Gadamer calls the "fusion of horizons," is the final destination it will lead us to. The process of understanding is a process of learning or self-cultivation (Bildung), in which the unfamiliar becomes familiar by adding to the repertory of our knowledge, and the alien becomes part of ourselves. As Gadamer reminds us: "It is the task of philosophy to discover what is common even in what is different. According to Plato, the task of the philosophical dialectician is `to learn to see things together in respect of the one.'"[2] This seems to me an extremely apposite

[2] The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays, trans. Nicholas Walker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 12.

formulation not only of the task of philosophy, but also of literary hermeneutics in a truly comparative outlook. Indeed, philosophy and literary hermeneutics are closely related, for the specific problems of literary interpretation are grounded in the nature of language; they can be best understood in the larger framework of philosophical hermeneutics. Accordingly, my discussion of literary interpretation is preceded by an examination of philosophers' concepts of language, and my comments on the works of poets are not literary criticism as such, but are intended to bring out the implications of those works for the theoretical point I try to make.

Given the scope of my project to deal with hermeneutic problems in philosophy and literature, in China and the West, I am constantly aware of the inadequacy of my knowledge for the task I have willingly undertaken to accomplish. I know that I have often stepped out of familiar grounds and trespassed upon the turf of others who have the right to claim familiarity and solidity of scholarship in those fields. One of the things I try to do here, however, is to pull down the usual barriers between scholarly colonies known as fields or disciplines, surrounded by academic hedgerows and marked out by departmental lines. This is undoubtedly a difficult task which I am ill-equipped to fulfil, but I feel encouraged by the example of Mr. Qian Zhongshu, whose work always gives me guidance in bringing the East and the West together, while his formidable knowledge and scholarly accomplishment I can never

emulate. Many of the ideas developed here were first generated in my conversations with him in Beijing many years ago, and inspired by his masterly comments on Chinese and Western works in his magnum opus, modestly entitled Guan zhui bian.[3] An embryonic form of the argument in the present study was shaped in a paper I published in Chinese in 1983.[4] Since then, I have been encouraged by many of my friends and colleagues on this side of the Pacific, who not only supported my effort to develop the ideas I had, but also generously gave their time and expertise to help me out in areas where their help was vital to remedy my ignorance or limited knowledge. I want first of all to thank Professor Jurij Striedter for sharpening my mind in thinking about literary theory and for insistently demanding clarity and consistency. My thanks also go to Professor Stephen Owen, with whom I had many enjoyable discussions about Chinese as well as Western poetry. I would like to express my gratitude to Professor Daniel Aaron for his warm friendship

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[3] The title, literally "Pipe-Awl Chapters," alludes to a phrase in the Zhuangzi: "to peep at the sky through a pipe and to point at the earth with an awl," which can of course never give one any idea of the expanse of the sky or the depth of the earth. The four volumes of Guan zhui bian (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1979; hereafter abbreviated as GZB), written in elegant classical Chinese interspersed with quotations in English, French, German, Italian, Spanish, and Latin, form an immense work of commentaries on ten of the classic books in the Chinese tradition. It is a monumental work of modern scholarship that evinces the author's great learning and his sustained effort to bring the ancient and the modern, Chinese and Western, into mutual illumination.

[4] "Shi wu da gu" [Poetry Has No Direct Interpretation], Wenyi yanjiu, 4:13-17.

and for the valuable suggestions he gave to me after reading the earlier chapters. I am grateful to Professor Haskell Block for reading the sections on Rilke and Mallarmé. I would also like to thank Linda Haverty, Marina van Zuylen, and Irene Kacandes for reading portions of this study. And last but not least, I want to thank my wife Weilin for her unfailing support and her almost blind confidence in me.

The last section of Chapter I was given in 1984 as the Eberhard L. Faber Class of 1915 Memorial Lecture at Princeton University, and subsequently published in Critical Inquiry 11 (March 1985). I want to thank Professor Earl Miner and my other hosts at Princeton for inviting me to deliver that lecture. I would also like to thank Professor W. J. T. Mitchell for giving me permission to use the essay first published in Critical Inquiry.

Cambridge, Mass. Z. L.

April 1989

A NOTE ON TRANSLATION.

I have translated all the passages quoted from Chinese sources mainly to make the translation part stylistically consistent with the rest of my writing. In the Bibliography, however, I have listed under the heading of a Chinese work its English version, in case a good translation is available. All Chinese names are spelt according to the Pinyin system which has a few letters pronounced quite differently from the way they sound in English, so it is helpful to remember their approximate equivalents: c = ts, q = ch, x = sh, z = dz, and zh = j.

For works originally in German or French, I always try to use existent English versions where possible; and when I have to provide my own translation, I often give the original first, followed by my translation in square brackets, if the quoted paragraph is relatively long. Lines of French and German poems are always given both the original and their English version.

CHAPTER I. THE DEBASEMENT OF WRITING

> Polonius. What do you read, my lord?
> Hamlet. Words, words, words.
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> Shakespeare, Hamlet, II.ii.191

> Duke Huan is reading in the hall, while Pian the wheelwright is hewing a wheel at the steps in front of it. Having put down his auger and chisel, he goes up and says to the Duke: "May I dare to ask, my lord, what kind of words are you reading?" "The words of the sages," says the Duke. Again he asks: "Are the sages still alive?" "No, they are dead," the Duke replies. The wheelwright says: "Then, what you are reading, my lord, is nothing but the dregs of the ancients!"
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> Zhuangzi, xiii, The Tao of Heaven

1. THE UNCONSCIOUS CREATION OF GENIUS

Socrates, according to Plato, once showed his contemporary poets some of their most perfect writings and found, upon inquiring about the meaning of their works, that "any of the bystanders could have explained those poems better than their actual authors."[1] In the original context of Socrates' defense, the point of this passage is to prove that no one is wise, especially with regard to knowing oneself, while its

[1] Plato, Apology 22b, The Collected Dialogues, including the Letters, ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), p. 8. Further references to Plato will be included in the text with title, the standard marginal sigla, and page number.

cogency depends on the strength of the ancient Greek idea of poetic inspiration, presented more clearly with a certain degree of humor and irony in Plato's Ion, i. e., the idea that when the poets are singing, they are possessed and not quite in their right mind, and therefore they are unable to understand their own works. The making of poetry is a miracle: for just like the frenzied bacchanals who, when possessed, draw milk and honey from the rivers, the poets sing when they are divinely inspired, when "the deity has bereft them of their senses, and uses them as ministers, along with soothsayers and godly seers" (Ion 534c, p. 220). Ultimately, it is to these memorable passages in Plato that we must trace the romantic idea of poetry as unpremeditated, spontaneous, and irrational, a kind of natural cry not executed according to the poet's intention and reflective consciousness.

Since Plato, the idea of unconscious creation of poetry has provided an answer to the question why literature is in constant need of comment and interpretation and, even more importantly, why literary interpretation cannot be judged by the criterion of the authorial intention.[2] To be sure, the fact that Socrates asked the poets to explain their own works seems to suggest that the need of interpretation was prior to

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[2] No wonder that W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley would quote, in their famous essay "The Intentional Fallacy," the passage from Socrates' Apology to support their attack on intentionalism. See Wimsatt, The Verbal Icon (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1954), p. 7.

the discovery of the poets' inability to explain, but in a way Socrates had anticipated that inability, for he had first interviewed the politicians before he came to the poets, and had come to the conclusion that most people were not aware of their own ignorance. Thus, when he asked the poets for self-interpretation, he was somehow prepared to discover them no less blind to their own ignorance than the politicians, and thereby to confirm his observation. Indeed, of all men, poets were perhaps the least able to achieve self-consciousness, for their work depended on divine inspiration rather than knowledge. For Socrates, the unconscious origination of poetry could best account for the poets' inability, since "it was not wisdom that enabled them to write their poetry, but a kind of instinct or inspiration, such as you find in seers and prophets who deliver all their sublime messages without knowing in the least what they mean" (Apology 22c, p. 8). Poets serve as the mere mouthpiece of gods, and when they sing of the great deeds of gods and heroes in the frenzy of divine madness, they talk deliriously but do not know what they are talking about. It is therefore up to the interpreter to give an explanation of "what the poets mean" in what they literally say.

In the nineteenth century, these seminal ideas were fully developed in European romanticism, above all in the transcendental idealism of German philosophy. The ancient idea of the unconscious creation of art, now integrated with the idea of genius, became an essential concept in romantic aesthetics.

In this respect, probably Friedrich von Schelling's contribution made the most noticeable impact. Although not the first to introduce the concept of the unconscious into aesthetics, Schelling was "more than anyone, responsible for making that Protean term an ineluctable part of the psychology of art."[3] In the conclusion to his System of Transcendental Idealism, Schelling ascribes poetic inspiration to "an obscure unknown power," an "incomprehensible principle which adds the objective to the conscious without the cooperation of freedom and in a certain way in opposition to freedom."[4] He conceives of inspiration as a force outside the realm of human action, a force like that of destiny, which pushes the poet to perfection without his conscious effort. Thus the writing of poetry seems an involuntary act, and the poet, no matter how specifically purposeful he may be, seems to be compelled "to express or represent things he does not himself fully see through and whose meaning is infinite" (GALC, p. 123). Schelling holds that every aesthetic production begins with an intrinsic contradiction, for it is completed with deliberation and consciousness, but it is not and cannot be made at will or according to a specific intention. Whatever is completed with

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[3] M. H. Abrams, The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1953), p. 210.

[4] David Simpson, ed., German Aesthetic and Literary Criticism: Kant, Fichte, Schelling, Schopenhauer, Hegel (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 122. Hereafter abbreviated as GALC.

deliberation can be learned and taught, but what makes a poem truly poetic, what constitutes the very essence of poetry, cannot be learned from others or accomplished by any conscious effort. "The work of art," Schelling observes, "reflects for us the identity of conscious and unconscious activity. But the opposition of the two is infinite, and it is overcome [aufgehoben] without any contribution of freedom. The basic character of the work of art is thus an unconscious infinity (synthesis of nature and freedom)" (GALC, p. 124). For Schelling, only genius can resolve the contradiction intrinsic to the making of poetry, because genius is the transcendental spirit that can attain to the synthesis of nature and freedom.

This and virtually all other references to genius in German aesthetics can be traced back to their fountain-head in Immanuel Kant, to his Critique of Judgment in particular. The contradiction Schelling sees in aesthetic production is also what Kant tries to solve in the third critique. In Kant, this contradiction takes shape in the matrix of a set of antinomies, which involve not only the production of art, but especially its reception, namely, the aesthetic judgment. Kant's concept of art, however, differs from Schelling's in that it holds that art at least begins as a rational and conscious act. Art, Kant remarks, is "a production through freedom, i. e., through a power of choice that bases its acts on

reason."[5] He further argues that "if the object is given as a product of art, and as such is to be declared beautiful, then we must first base it on a concept of what the thing is [meant] to be, since art always presupposes a purpose in the cause (and its causality)" (§ 48, p. 179). In other words, the production of a work of art is purposive and intentional, not an unconscious infinity as Schelling maintains. But Kant also acknowledges that art as distinguished from science is not what "we <u>can</u> do the moment we <u>know</u> what is to be done, i. e., the moment we are sufficiently acquainted with what the desired effect is" (§ 43, pp. 170-71). A work of art cannot simply be copied or reproduced according to rule or an express purpose; it must seem artless and unintentional, that is, must look like nature, and "there must be no hint that the rule was hovering before the artist's eyes and putting fetters on his mental powers" (§ 45, p. 174).

Here, Kant faces the same contradiction Schelling later encounters: the antinomy that art is made by following rules and yet cannot be made by following rules, a contradiction that lies at the very heart of Kant's critique of aesthetic judgment. The problem with aesthetic judgment lies in its inherently personal nature, which makes its claim a matter of taste rather than reason, and therefore difficult to be uni-

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[5] <u>Critique of Judgment</u>, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), § 43, p. 170. Further references to this edition will be to section and page numbers.

versally applicable. A judgment of taste must be based on a concept if it is to lay any claim to universal validity, and yet, it cannot be based on a concept in order to be sufficiently distinguished from logical judgment. To solve that antinomy requires a special capacity of going beyond the two sides of the opposition, and that capacity is found in Kant's idea of genius, for genius, Kant argues, has the talent to represent "aesthetic ideas," which transcend all concepts while still providing necessary grounds for the validity of an aesthetic judgment. In the creation of art, genius is not only above the rule but is itself the rule: it "gives the rule to art" (§ 46, p. 174). As poetry demands the highest degree of spontaneous creativity, poetry holds, Kant maintains, the highest rank among all the arts: it "owes its origin almost entirely to genius and is least open to guidance by precept or examples" (§ 53, p. 196). By giving art its rule, genius solves the contradiction between conformity and inventiveness. It produces things for which there can be no determinate rule, hence its _originality_; it gives art the rule not to be reproduced but followed by others, hence its _exemplariness_. Kant, however, does not emphasize the role of the unconscious in the production of art: this idea is only implied when he claims that genius as natural gift is not acquired but spontaneous and unintentional. Though it is capable of great achievement, genius does not know where its own capability comes from: it "cannot describe or indicate scientifically how it brings

about its products" (§ 46, p. 175). "No Homer or Wieland can show how his ideas, rich in fancy and yet also in thought, arise and meet in his mind," says Kant, "the reason is that he himself does not know, and hence also cannot teach it to anyone else" (§ 47, p. 177).

What Kant merely implied was taken up by Schelling and developed into a psychology of artistic production, in which the concept of genius became inseparable from that of the unconscious. For Kant, as Gadamer notes, genius was "only a complement" to what was essential in aesthetic judgment, but with his successors, it soon became the predominant concept in aesthetics (TM, pp. 50-55). Kant believes that genius needs to be guided and curbed by taste, which "clips its wings, and makes it civilized, or polished," and that in case of a conflict which calls for sacrificing one of the two, "then it should rather be on the side of genius" (§ 50, p. 188). As a kind of sensus communis, aesthetic taste is the power that makes the work of genius accessible to others, shared by the community. In the romantic apotheosis, however, genius becomes something quite different. It becomes a Byronic hero, a rebel fighting not just against the classicist rules in art, but against the entire value system of society. Schopenhauer talks about the "lonely existence" (ein einsames Dasein) of genius in an alien and hostile world, and maintains that the great works of a genius can be accomplished "only insofar as he ignores the ways and means, the thoughts and opinions of his

contemporaries, quietly creates what they dislike, and scorns what they praise."[6] In fact, Schopenhauer's genius is different from the man in the street not only as a rebel but also as a neurotic or even lunatic. Schopenhauer detects a close relation, some sort of a kinship, between genius and madness, and the unconscious is very much emphasized.[7] Genius, says Schopenhauer, does not work with abstract concepts but with the Idea, and "just because the Idea is and remains perceptual, the artist is not conscious in abstracto of the intention and aim of his work. Not a concept but an Idea is present in his mind; hence he cannot give an account of his actions. He works, as people say, from mere feeling and unconsciously, indeed instinctively." (GALC, p. 188). Evolved out of the philosophy of Fichte and Schelling, the concept of unconscious genius was thus immensely popularized by Schopenhauer, and quickly became a critical commonplace not only in Germany, but everywhere in Europe.

And yet, unconscious creation cannot be complete unless it is completed by conscious understanding, since art by its

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[6] Parerga und Paralipomena, § 57, Werke in zwei Bänden, hrsg. Werner Brede (München: Carl Hanser, 1977), 2:138, 140. Schopenhauer's philosophy did not have a notable impact until the 1850's, and he attacked vehemently Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel. But, as René Wellek argues, "in spite of the delayed effect, Schopenhauer definitely belongs to the early decades of the 19th century"; and "his aesthetics is actually quite similar to Schelling's" (A History of Modern Criticism: 1750-1950 [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955], p. 309).

[7] See Schopenhauer, The World as Will and Representation, in GALC, pp. 169-72.

very nature addresses an audience. With its emphasis focused on the creative genius, however, the theory of unconscious creation cannot adequately deal with the problem of reception and interpretation, for how can poets offer any guidance in the understanding of poetry, if they themselves do not know what they mean? How can they ever be entrusted with the task of interpretation, if they themselves cannot yet answer the question Socrates once put to them? Understanding is always a conscious activity, even unconscious creation needs to be understood consciously. In due time, therefore, the question of how to bring the unconscious creation of genius to the level of conscious understanding will necessarily arise, and the focus of attention will shift from the creative to the interpretive activity. It is inevitable then that in romantic literary theory, hermeneutics will complement the theory of aesthetics.

2. THE TASK OF HERMENEUTICS

To understand the unconscious creation of genius is precisely what underlies Friedrich Schleiermacher's project of general hermeneutics. Some scholars have argued that Schleiermacher, despite his affinity to Friedrich Schlegel and other romantic poets, was not a romantic himself. Martin Redeker maintains, for example, that Schleiermacher joined his romantic friends in their cultural activities and made use of their language,

"but in the end he did not yield to the temptation of romantic fantasy and sentimentality, of their fabrication and mawkishness (Erfindsamkeit und Empfindsamkeit), since his crucial religious and theological concepts were not rooted in romanticism."[8] Redeker concedes, however, that not only did Schleiermacher learn from the romantics how to understand poetry and art in general, but "his hermeneutics, his interpretation of Plato, and his philosophical development also received an impetus from the romantic outlook on life."[9] There is no question that the romantic theory of unconscious creation and the need for interpretation it entails form a perfect background for the rise of Schleiermacher's hermeneutics.

Long before Schleiermacher formulated his hermeneutic theory, readers and critics had of course often wrestled with problems of understanding and interpretation. There had been both a philological approach to classical literature and a long tradition of biblical exegesis, but it is Schleiermacher who first shaped a general hermeneutics out of such specialized applications. "At present," Schleiermacher wrote in 1819, "there is no general hermeneutics as the art of understanding but only a variety of specialized hermeneutics."[10] In his

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[8] Friedrich Schleiermacher: Leben und Werk (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1968), pp. 92-3.

[9] Ibid., p. 91.

[10] Hermeneutics: The Handwritten Manuscripts, trans. James Duke and Jack Forstman (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1977), p. 95; hereafter abbreviated as H. See also Wilhelm Dilthey, "The Rise of Hermeneutics," trans. Fredric Jameson, New Literary

project to establish hermeneutics as a general theory beyond the particularity of local theories of interpretation, there is evidently something like a Kantian critique, for just as the critical philosophy inquires into the very capacity of knowing before it is concerned with any concrete knowledge, Schleiermacher's hermeneutics demands that we investigate the nature of understanding itself before we understand particular texts or rules of textual criticism. For him, hermeneutics is not a mere bundle of exegetical rules but an art, a Kunstlehre, i. e., the art of methodical understanding that probes and articulates what the author is unaware of in the act of writing. If to understand means to bring into consciousness what the author has accomplished unconsciously, the task of hermeneutics must then be defined in terms of the relationship between author and interpreter. Thus Schleiermacher declares:

> The task is to be formulated as follows: "To understand the [speech] at first as well as and then even better than its author." Since we have no direct knowledge of what was in the author's mind, we must try to become aware of many things of which he himself may have been unconscious, except insofar as he reflects on his own work and becomes his own reader. Moreover, with respect to the objective aspects, the author had no data other than we have (H, p. 112).

Evidently, Schleiermacher tries to seek support for his hermeneutic theory from the romantic aesthetics of genius, to

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History 3 (Winter 1972): 230-44; and Paul Ricoeur, "The Task of Hermeneutics," Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences, ed. and trans. John B. Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 45 ff.

which the concept of unconscious production is essential. But the focus of attention in Schleiermacher's formulation is not the creative artist but the critic, not the author but the interpreter. By bringing into conscious reflection many things that may have remained unreflective and involuntary for the author, the interpreter is able to reach a higher degree of knowledge than the author himself. This audacious manifesto of hermeneutics is justly famous and influential in the nineteenth century, repeated by Boeckh, Steinthal, Dilthey, and others. Indeed, this formulation of the hermeneutic task has such profound implications for dealing with the tension between author and interpreter with regard to the text that it has become a widely accepted principle. It contains, as Gadamer notes, "the whole problem of hermeneutics" (TM, p. 169).

It is nevertheless important to note that Schleiermacher had his reservations about the romantic obsession with the unconscious. When he began to lecture on hermeneutics at the University of Halle in the summer of 1805, he had been translating Plato for years. It was not only a project to put the Platonic dialogues in German, but also an attempt to discover the inner coherence of Plato through the fragmentary form of dialogues so that the philosopher could be understood in his unique individuality. Before that inner context was fully reconstructed, Schleiermacher warned his reader, it would be "premature" to claim that "we might now be able to understand

Plato better than he understood himself," because that would be a truly unplatonic remark, considering that Plato himself "puts so high a value upon the consciousness of ignorance."[11] Indeed, it is the interpreter who must first of all be aware of his own ignorance in relation to the author and the text: he can fully understand the author only insofar as he understands the language of the text after careful examination. Schleiermacher tries to understand Plato by working out the interrelationship of the dialogues in a hermeneutic circle. In that circle, "every dialogue is taken not only as a whole in itself, but also in its connection with the rest," and out of that circle, Plato's thought will emerge as a complete and coherent structure so that "he may himself be at last understood as a Philosopher and a perfect Artist."[12] In his Plato translations, Schleiermacher already applied the hermeneutic principles he came to formulate later theoretically. It is quite clear that the inner coherence of the language and the individuality of the author, the text and its cultural and historical context, are equally important for his hermeneutics, and that the meaning of the text is worked out in a circular process that goes from parts to the whole, and from whole to the parts.

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[11] Introductions to the Dialogues of Plato, trans. William Dobson (New York: Arno Press, 1973), p. 5.

[12] Ibid., p. 14.

For Schleiermacher, the author is not only an unconscious being but also a linguistic being, and one must attend to two moments--the psychological and the grammatical--in order to understand an author's speech. It is indeed Schleiermacher's great contribution that he adds to the psychology of art a linguistic dimension and thereby seeks to ground hermeneutics on the analysis of language. Speaking is conceived both as a moment in the development of the person and one in relation to language as a system. The interpreter can understand the text better than its author not just because the author is unconscious of what he says, but because the meaning of the text, far from being determined entirely by the author as an individual, has to be negotiated in a hermeneutic process in relation to the total structure of a given language:

> Language is the only presupposition in hermeneutics, and everything that is to be found, including the other objective and subjective presuppositions, must be discovered in language (H, p. 50).

Since Dilthey later presents Schleiermacher as an advocate of psychological empathy, which is largely a distorted image formed in the perspective of Dilthey's own Lebensphilosophie, it is extremely important not to overlook the linguistic side of Schleiermacher's hermeneutic theory in which the author is understood as a person insofar as he is understood in his language.[13] As Schleiermacher remarks, "one must already know a

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[13] See Kurt Mueller-Vollmer's introduction to The Hermeneutic Reader (New York: Continuum, 1985), pp. 8-12.

man in order to understand what he says, and yet one first becomes acquainted with him by what he says" (H, p. 56). Indeed, language speaks through the individual author as much as the author speaks the language, for "each person represents one locus where a given language takes shape in a particular way, and his speech can be understood only in the context of the totality of the language" (Ibid., p. 98). To understand a speech means, therefore, to comprehend the language and what it says about the thinking of the speaker: the two sides are complementary to each other. As Schleiermacher remarks, the art of speaking and that of understanding are closely related: "rhetoric and hermeneutics belong together and both are related to dialectics"; it is therefore very important to keep in mind the relationship of understanding with thinking and speaking. "Speaking is the medium for the communality of thought (die Gemeinschaftlichkeit des Denkens)," he says:

> Indeed, a person thinks by means of speaking. Thinking matures by means of internal speech, and to that extent speaking is only developed thought. But whenever the thinker finds it necessary to fix what he has thought, there arises the art of speaking, that is, the transformation of original internal speaking, and interpretation becomes necessary (H, p. 97).

Of great significance here is Schleiermacher's statement that interpretation arises, of necessity, in the process of transformation, as thinking takes the material form of fixed, external speech. Internal speech does not call for interpretation, since it is transparent and self-sufficient, nothing but

"developed thought" ("der gewordene Gedanke"), and can understand itself as such. But as soon as the thinker tries to "fix what he has thought," the moment he wants to formulate and communicate in language as external speech, his thought must depend on words for conveyance. Internal speech is thus transformed into something very different from itself and becomes inadequate for the very purpose of communication. It seems then that language always frustrates itself in its role as medium for communication; it has such inherent deficiency that no one should take understanding for granted. Instead, as Schleiermacher points out, we must take as the basic assumption for hermeneutics "that misunderstanding occurs as a matter of course, and so understanding must be willed and sought at every point" (H, p. 110).

When we come back to the initial question of understanding literature, it becomes quite clear that poetry needs to be interpreted not only because the poet is unconscious of his creation, but because the language of poetry seems either defective for its purpose, or in any case incapable of making the meaning of poetry self-evident. We can think of literary interpretation as an effort to make poetry to speak, and the basic assumption of literary criticism, as Northrop Frye puts it, is "not that the poet does not know what he is talking about, but that he cannot talk about what he knows."[14] The

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[14] Frye, Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), p. 5.

alienation of thinking in language--the transformation of internal speech into verbal signs, especially in the fixed, external form of writing--makes interpretation indispensable. The poet who should be the most skillful in the use of words is ironically the one who has difficulty in speaking, and the interpreter is called on to speak for him. It is this ironic inarticulation of poetry that constitutes the area in which the whole project of literary hermeneutics must begin its investigation. But again, the more specific problems in literary hermeneutics have their roots in the larger problems dealt with in general hermeneutics, so we must first start our discussion on a more general level, with questions posed by philosophers before we turn to those raised by poets.

3. THE NECESSITY OF COMMENTARY

Comment and interpretation are necessary of course not just for poetic texts, but for texts of all kinds; and the over-abundance of books is not merely an outcome of modern mass printing. In the late sixteenth century, Michel Montaigne already felt amazed and even repelled at the teeming munificence of commentaries when he complained that "there is more trouble in interpreting interpretations than in interpreting the things themselves, and there are more books on books than on any other subjects. We do nothing but write comments on one

another."[15] Yet the multiplicity of commentaries is a common phenomenon in cultural traditions where we find a set of canonical texts and a host of exegetical works that help to hand down the canon in the ebb and flow of cultural continuity. This is true of the classical Graeco-Roman tradition, the Bible with its imposing array of exegeses, the Buddhist sacred literature, and the Chinese heritage of learning with its emphasis on accumulative wisdom rather than individual originality. "I transmit but do not make," says Confucius, "I trust and devote myself to the study of the ancients."[16] This unpretentious statement may have captured the true meaning of the word "tradition," because the handing over of a cultural heritage depends on a present conscious effort to preserve and enact what was valuable in the past, on our appreciation of what the ancients have achieved and bequeathed to us, and on the shared nature of language, which is the instrument of transmission par excellence.

Confucius meant transmission in speaking, and in one of his more metaphysical moments, he realized that speaking had its limitations. "I will not speak," declares Confucius. His disciple Zigong anxiously asks: "What do we, the youngsters,

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[15] M. Montaigne, Essays, trans. J. M. Cohen (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1958), p. 349.

[16] Lunyu zhengyi [The Analects with Exegesis], ed. Liu Baonan, in vol. 1 of Zhuzi jicheng [Collection of Classics], vii.1, p. 134. References to Confucius, abbreviated as LY, are to chapter, section, and page numbers.

have to transmit, if you should give up speaking?" Then the Master says: "Does Heaven ever speak? Yet the four seasons run their course, and a hundred things rise and grow. Does Heaven ever speak?" (LY, xvii.19, p. 379). The ideal way of teaching (for here Confucius is mainly concerned with transmitting virtue and knowledge to his disciples) would be teaching by concrete examples in life rather than by precepts couched in words: a way of effortless and wordless teaching, totally absorbed and quietly implemented, just like the way Heaven regulates all things to perfection without saying a single word. By pointing to the cyclical course of the seasons and the generative process which seemed to follow the unspoken laws of nature, Confucius revealed his desire to have the moral order in society shaped on the model of the heavenly order in the universe, allowing virtue and knowledge to come to the world naturally and become our spontaneous behavior, our intuitive second nature. It was of course the dream of a teacher-philosopher that knowledge and virtue could be taught in their purity, without ever being filtered through words, or trickling down through interpretations and reinterpretations, that transmission of culture could totally dispense with language and, indeed, that nothing would come between thinking and its realization in life--a dream, as we shall see, that appears to have been at the heart of philosophy in both the East and the West.

As a great pedagogue, however, Confucius knew only too well that teaching was impossible without the employment of words, even though words might confuse and mislead those who are being taught. While reluctantly granting words the value of usefulness, he nevertheless remained suspicious of the value of language per se and of any extravagant use of it. "A virtuous man is certainly capable of making valuable speech," he says, "but a man of valuable speech is not necessarily a man of virtue" (LY, xiv.4, p. 301). Having recognized the discrepancy between the profession of virtue in words and the moral qualities of the speaker, Confucius gives his warning against naive credulity in the face value of verbal excellence. His attitude towards language is at times a completely utilitarian one, as he insists that "So far as words can get to the point, that is enough" (LY, xv.41, p. 349). In this pragmatic view, language would serve a strictly communicative purpose, but difficulties would immediately arise when we turn to real situations in linguistic communication where words hardly ever get to the point in exactly the way Confucius would have approved, for very often there is either more or less in language than is sufficient to get to the point. But language surely serves more purposes than Confucius here allows it. In the artistic use of language, its function is not just to get to a point. Even in sending a message to its destination, it would take much more than the plainness of homespun words to make an effective delivery. After all, even

Confucius himself acknowledges that some kind of rhetorical embellishment (wen) is necessary for effective verbal communication. "Intention has its destination," he is quoted as saying. "Speech complements intention, and embellishment complements speech. If you do not speak, who will know your intention? If you speak without any embellishment, your words will not go far enough."[17] Confucius is certainly not endorsing the use of language from a purely rhetorical or literary point of view, since all his teachings invariably point to a single direction, namely, the perfection of morality in society as well as in individual life. It is therefore simply impossible to consider the problem of language as separated from ethical and political issues in the framework of Confucian ideology.

In any case, the tension between being and words, intention and expression, is evident enough when we find that the man of virtue and the man of speech may not correspond. In that brief dialogue Confucius had with Zigong, such tension is dramatized in the Master's desire for silence and the dis-

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[17] This quotation is not found in the Analects, but in Zuozhuan or Zuo's commentary on the Spring and Autumn Annals (juan 36, "the twenty-fifth year of Duke Xiang," in Ruan Yuan ed. Shisan jing zhushu [Thirteen Classics with Annotations], 2 vols. [Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1980], 2:1985). Some critics have questioned its authenticity on the grounds that it seems to jar with Confucius' utilitarian view of language as we find it in the more reliable record of the Analects. But we need not see the two records as being at variance, for it is possible to interpret what Confucius says here as making a strategic point, which serves the practical purpose of helping carry the message far enough to its destination.

ciple's anxiety for transmission. Language is here at work on two different levels: on the one hand is Zigong waiting to transmit what Confucius has to say, and on the other is the Master who professes to say nothing, or, on still another level, as we know from an earlier quote, to transmit what was already made and said in antiquity. In spite of his claim of being a mere vehicle of ancient virtue and wisdom, however, Confucius is in fact one of the most influential thinkers in ancient China, and the Analects becomes one of the source books in the Chinese cultural tradition, an original work that has itself elicited numerous annotations and commentaries. Thus, books are written which interpret the Analects, which interprets Confucius, who interprets the ancients. Within this chain of interpretations and reinterpretations, the locus of origin seems always receding, and the desire for silence remains at the center of a whirl of words incessantly dancing around it. The commentaries are complementary to one another in endless reiterations and explanations, and the possibility of interpretations proves to be truly inexhaustible.

All commentaries arise from the desire to reclaim that which has been lost in the transformation of thinking into language or to reveal that which is hidden or obscured in expression. They belong, therefore, as Michel Foucault would say, to the archaeology of knowledge. They dig into the layer of literal sense of the text and try to retrieve what was the primal discourse in its pretextual condition; but they never

really get to the origin of discourse, only to the proliferation of commentaries. "The task of commentary can never, by definition, be completed," Foucault declares:

> Language sets itself the task of restoring an absolutely primal discourse, but it can express that discourse only by trying to approximate to it, by attempting to say things about it that are similar to it, thereby bringing into existence the infinity of adjacent and similar fidelities of interpretation. The commentary resembles endlessly that which it is commenting upon and which it can never express.[18]

If the primal discourse needs restoration at all, quite obviously it means, as Foucault seems to suggest, that this discourse is already lost in the written text, and the language of commentary sets itself the unattainable goal of reclaiming that lost discourse through its trace in writing. Thus understood, writing signifies not only what it records, but the loss of what was originally contained in thought as internal speech, the absence of that primal discourse which the written text fails to preserve and commentaries fail to retrieve. But inasmuch as both text and commentary exist as writing, the distinction between them becomes blurred and insignificant vis-à-vis the primal discourse which alone holds the ideal harmony of the sign and the thing. It is writing as the external form of language that more than anything else invites comment and interpretation, thereby becomes the focus

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[18] The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), pp. 41-2.

of hermeneutic investigation. As Gadamer notes, "thus written texts [or fixed texts, fixierte Texte] present the real hermeneutical task. Writing involves self-alienation. Its overcoming, the reading of the text, is thus the highest task of understanding" (TM, p. 352).

4. CONVERSATION AND TRANSCRIPTION

Philosophers, at least ancient philosophers, apparently prefer to commit their thoughts to living discourse rather than to writing. When we think of an ancient philosopher, be it Socrates or Confucius, the image that readily comes to the mind is a master talking to his disciples as they walk along, trying out ideas that occur to them at the moment, revising and polishing those ideas till truth unfolds and shines out in the succession of questions and answers. Words are spoken to the right audience, understood in the immediacy of a dialogue, and the plenitude of meaning is warranted by further questions and answers, explanations and modifications. Once a thought is put in writing, however, it loses connection with the living voice and the dialogic context, and is exposed to the violence of misunderstanding. In the last part of Plato's Phaedrus, Socrates dwells on the vulnerability of writing and its inferiority to oral speech. "You know, Phaedrus, that's the strange thing about writing," he says; "once a thing is put in writing, the composition, whatever it may be, drifts

all over the place, getting into the hands not only of those who understand it, but equally of those who have no business with it; it doesn't know how to address the right people, and not address the wrong;" and when confronted with violence, "ill-treated and unfairly abused," it is "unable to defend or help itself" (Phaedrus 275d, p. 521).

For Plato, to address the right audience is important in order to have meaningful communication, and the same is true for Confucius. "Fail to converse with the one to whom you can talk is to miss out the person," says Confucius; "converse with the one to whom you cannot talk is to miss out the word. A wise man will miss out neither the person nor the word" (LY, xv.8, p. 336). But how do you know whether you can or cannot talk to a person without first trying him out in conversation? And that is precisely the point: only through conversation will you know and decide what to do with the person. Like Socrates, Confucius is concerned not with the written but the spoken word. If to talk to the wrong person is wasting the word, imagine how much worse it would be when the word is written down and addresses everybody promiscuously! Confucius, of course, did talk to his disciples, though at one point he desired silence, but the source of our knowledge about him and his thoughts, the Analects, does not come from his hand.

If the form of writing records speech, putting it down permanently, can we then say that writing helps us remember what we hear only momentarily by changing it into something

we can always come back to and see again? Not so, according to Socrates. The invention of writing threatens to impair memory instead of being an aid to it:

> If men learn this, it will implant forgetfulness in their souls; they will cease to exercise memory because they rely on that which is written, calling things to remembrance no longer from within themselves, but by means of external marks (Phaedrus 275a, p. 520).

For Socrates, memory is not just recollection of diurnal experiences but recovery of the true knowledge of eternal forms the soul once possessed in pre-existence: we know by remembering what we once knew in a purer state. Thus, by implanting forgetfulness, writing obstructs our way to knowledge and blots out with its indelible stains the inward vision obtained through a mnemonic recuperation. The concept of true knowledge as recollection of the soul lies at the center of Platonic mysticism: it forms the basis of rejecting writing as external marks, since memory works "from within," and "may be said as it were to write words in our souls."[19] In other words, truth resides only in the internal speech as intuition and memory of the soul, but never in writing as an unreliable form of transcription.

That may explain why Socrates never wrote down his ideas himself, and why Plato denies that he is writing when writing

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[19] Philebus 39a, p. 1119. For recollection as recovery of knowledge, see Phaedo 75e; Meno 81c; Philebus 34c; and Theaetetus 198d.

is exactly what he does. For Plato, recording philosophical conversations poses an embarrassing question, to which the solution he comes up with is to minimize his role as writer, insisting that "there is not and will not be any written work of Plato's own. What are now called his are the work of a Socrates embellished and modernized" (Epistle ii, 314c, p. 1567). In other words, Plato presents himself as a mere scribe who transmits the speech of his master in a form as transparent as possible, trying to keep the living word intact in his transcription. For Plato, the only form of writing that allows such life-preserving transcription is that of the dialogue. As Schleiermacher comments, "the dialogistic form, necessary as an imitation of that original and reciprocal communication, would be as indispensable and natural to his writings as to his oral instruction."[20] And as Gadamer notes, the hermeneutic significance of the Platonic dialogue lies in its emphasis on the art of questioning, which is also the art of dialectics. In contrast to the rigid form of assertive statement in writing, the dialogue embodies the art of dialectics by seeking truth in an exchange of questions and answers, by its open-ended orientation and the formation of concepts as the working out of specific problems. We can see, Gadamer remarks, "the way in which Plato seeks to overcome the weakness of the logoi and especially that of the written ones, through his own dia-

[20] Introductions to the Dialogues of Plato, p. 17.

logues. The literary form of the dialogue places language and concept back within the original movement of the conversation. This protects words from all dogmatic abuse" (TM, p. 332). Thus, as a form of writing, the Platonic dialogue overcomes the weakness of the logoi by effacing itself as writing, presenting itself instead as an accurate transcription of what is actually spoken.

Evidently, in Plato, as later on in the whole tradition of Western philosophy, there is a metaphysical hierarchy that privileges the silent grasp of thinking itself; the spoken word is regarded as adequate insofar as it immediately realizes inner speech, but writing is discredited as the external form of expression, a kind of secondary signifier. In the Hegelian system, for example, we may find one of the most impressive formulations of the metaphysical hierarchy. Hegel maintains that thinking as the inner is necessarily alienated when it is externalized into language, which, as an "outer expression," conceals as much as it reveals, and never quite expresses the inner to the precise point. "For that reason," says the philosopher, "we might just as truly say that these outer expressions express the inner too much as that they do so too little."[21] And yet, Hegel does not so much devalue language per se as its outer form, namely, writing. In living speech, the inner self as "pure ego" is immediately present,

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[21] Hegel, The Phenomenology of Mind, trans. J. B. Baillie, 2nd ed. (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1949), p. 340.

and the force of mind acquires the form of reality, "the form in which qua language it exists to be its content, and possesses authority, qua spoken word." Any other form is inadequate, for only the form of oral speech "contains this ego in its purity; it alone expresses I, I itself."[22] In contradistinction to the spoken word, the written form of language seems only to provide a concrete, finite, and dispensable shape in which the self is not immediately present, and the personal voice is not heard. But philosophy, after all, is a kind of writing; therefore, in its debasement of writing, it seems only trying to put an end to itself. As Richard Rorty says, "it is characteristic of the Kantian tradition that, no matter how much writing it does, it does not think that philosophy should be `written,' any more than science should be. Writing is an unfortunate necessity; what is really wanted is to show, to demonstrate, to point out, to exhibit, to make one's interlocutor stand at gaze before the world."[23]

In our time, however, what has become the predominant view is precisely a critique of this fear of writing, since language has now come to be a focus of interest, and thinking itself is recognized as being by nature linguistic. As Gadamer observes, the problem of language has come "to occupy the same central position in current philosophical discussions that the

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[22] Ibid., p. 530.

[23] Rorty, "Philosophy as a Kind of Writing: An Essay on Derrida," New Literary History 10 (Autumn 1978): 145.

concept of thought, or `thought thinking itself,' held in philosophy a century and a half ago."[24] Although Gadamer acknowledges the hermeneutic significance of the form of Plato's dialogues, his discussion finally leads up to an attempt to correct Plato's misguided view of language. In Plato's view, writing is seen only as an external moment of dubious equivocation, which is eventually discarded by true dialectics, while "the pure thought of ideas, dianoia, is silent, for it is a dialogue of the soul with itself (aneu phones). The logos is the stream that flows from this thought and sounds out through the mouth" (TM, p. 368). But, Gadamer goes on to argue, "the realization of meaning in sound cannot involve a claim that what is said is true. Plato undoubtedly did not consider the fact that the process of thought, if conceived as a dialogue of soul, itself involves a connection with language" (TM, p. 368). In Cratylus and the seventh epistle, says Gadamer, Plato did not actually grapple with the "real relationship between words and things," and consequently, "Plato's discovery of the ideas conceals the true nature of language" (TM, p. 369).

Gadamer challenges the obviously untenable claim that what is said is true, a claim based on a peculiar presumption in the Western tradition that logos as meaning is immediately

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[24] "The Universality of the Hermeneutical Problem (1966)," in Philosophical Hermeneutics, trans. and ed. David E. Linge (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), p. 3.

realized in sound. In Jacques Derrida's deconstructive critique of Western philosophy, that presumption is also a major target, what he sees as an inveterate prejudice in Western culture and calls "logocentrism: the metaphysics of phonetic writing."[25] Derrida argues that Western phonetic writing as total transcription of the living voice inscribes a logocentric prejudice which privileges speech over writing, regarding the truth of logos as "the articulated unity of sound and sense within the phonie. With regard to this unity, writing would always be derivative, accidental, particular, exterior, doubling the signifier: phonetic. 'Sign of a sign,' said Aristotle, Rousseau, and Hegel" (OG, p. 29). Evidently, by invoking the names of three important philosophers from different periods of time, Derrida wants to emphasize the powerful and thorough permeation of the logocentric prejudice through the entire history of Western philosophy. The word "Western" here is significant, for it is his belief that logocentrism, like phonetic writing, exists in the West and the West alone.

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[25] Derrida, Of Grammatology, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), p. 3. Hereafter abbreviated as OG.

5. THE TAO AND THE LOGOS

According to Derrida, logocentrism in metaphysics is fully manifested in Western alphabetic writing as phonocentrism; it is therefore a purely Western phenomenon embodied in Western phonetic writing. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak points this out in the translator's preface to Of Grammatology: "Almost by a reverse ethnocentrism, Derrida insists that logocentrism is a property of the West . . . Although something of the Chinese prejudice of the West is discussed in Part I, the East is never seriously studied or deconstructed in the Derridean text" (OG, p. lxxxii). In fact, not only is the East never seriously studied or deconstructed but in the "largely non-phonetic scripts like Chinese or Japanese," Derrida finds "the testimony of a powerful movement of civilization developing outside of all logocentrism" (OG, 90). Here, the boundary Derrida seems to draw between phonetic and nonphonetic signs, therefore between the West and the East, makes one wonder whether the logocentric prejudice or the metaphysical hierarchy with regard to thinking, speaking, and writing also exists in the East at all? Whether the nonphonetic Chinese scripts really mark the outer boundaries of all logocentrism? And finally, whether there is any word in the nonphonetic Chinese that registers, as the word logos does, something like the Western metaphysical hierarchy?

Schopenhauer remarks, by citing Cicero (De Officiis, I, 16), that the Greek word logos means both ratio and oratio, both reason and speech.[26] Stephen Ullmann also observes that logos as a notoriously ambiguous word has a serious effect on philosophical thought because it "has two chief meanings, one corresponding to Latin oratio, `the word or that by which the inward thought is expressed', the other to Latin ratio, `the inward thought' itself."[27] In other words, logos means both thinking (Denken) and speaking (Sprechen).[28] In his essay "Man and Language," Gadamer also reminds us that the word logos, though often translated as "reason" or "thinking," originally and chiefly means "language," and that human being as animal rationale (das vernünftige Lebewesen) is actually "animal that has language" (das Lebewesen, das Sprache hat).[29]

Significantly, tao, the Chinese philosophical concept par excellence, has also this interesting dual nature that inherently connects thinking with speaking. In English, the word

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[26] On the Fourfold Root of the Principle of Sufficient Reason, trans. E. F. J. Payne (La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 1974), pp. 163-4.

[27] Semantics: An Introduction to the Science of Meaning (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1964), p. 173.

[28] Joachim Ritter and Karlfried Gründer, eds., Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie, vol. 5 (Basel: Schwabe, 1980), s. v. "Logos."

[29] Gadamer, "Mensch und Sprache," Gesammelte Werke (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1986), 2:146; also see Philosophical Hermeneutics, pp. 59, 60.

tao is usually translated as "way."[30] Although not exactly a mistranslation, "way" is only one of the meanings of the poly-semous Chinese character tao (or dao), but not the crucial meaning that has a direct bearing on the complexity of the interrelationship between thinking and language. It is therefore important and especially relevant to our discussion here to note that tao as used in the philosophical book Laozi has two other meanings: "thinking" and "speaking." In his monumental commentary on Chinese classics, Guan zhui bian or "Pipe-Awl Chapters," Qian Zhongshu provides an extremely insightful explication of the opening lines of the Laozi, pointing out explicitly the comparability of tao and logos.[31] The word tao is repeated three times in the first sentence of the Laozi, and the repetition certainly makes a serious point by playing on the two meanings of the word tao: tao as thinking and tao as the verb "to speak":

> The tao that can be tao-ed ["spoken of"]
> Is not the constant tao;
> The name that can be named
> Is not the constant name.[32]

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[30] There are well over forty English translations of the Laozi (Lao Tzu) or Dao de jing, and the key term tao (dao) is translated as "way" in many of them. See, e. g., the otherwise excellent translations by Wing-tsit Chan (The Way of Lao Tzu [Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1963]) and D. C. Lau (Tao Te Ching [Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963]).

[31] See Qian Zhongshu, GZB, 2:403-10.

[32] Laozi zhu [The Annotated Laozi], annotated by Wang Bi (226-49), in vol. 3 of Zhuzi jicheng [Collection of Classics], i.1, p. 1. Further references to this edition, abbreviated as L, will be to chapter, section, and page numbers.

Puns like this are really untranslatable, and the point gets completely lost in English translation which usually reads, "the way that can be spoken of is not the constant way." The problem is that "way" and "to speak" in English have nothing in common, but in the Chinese original they are one and the same word. Thus, in the translation above, I try to make tao "look like" a verb in order to capture the point of the pun in the original text. According to Laozi the philosopher, tao is both immanent and transcendent; it is the begetter of all things, therefore, it is not and cannot be named after any of these things. In other words, tao is the ineffable, the "mystery of mysteries" beyond the power of language (L, i.3a, p. 1). Even the name tao is not a name in itself: "I do not know its name; so I just call it `tao'" (L, xxv.56, p. 14); "The tao is for ever nameless" (L, xxxii.72, p. 18). The totality of the tao is kept intact only in knowing silence; hence this famous paradox that "the one who knows does not speak; the one who speaks does not know" (L, lvi.128, p. 34).

One might protest that the Laozi, despite its extreme conciseness, is after all a "book of five thousand characters," so Laozi has not only spoken, but has written a whole book about what he believes to be ineffable. This paradox, however, as though anticipated, may be partly reconciled by the legendary genesis of the book as recorded in the biography of Laozi by the great historian Sima Qian (145?-90? B. C.):

> Laozi cultivated the tao and virtue; and his teachings sought to achieve seclusion and self-effacement. He lived in Zhou for a long time, but he left the place when he saw that it was in deterioration. As he reached the Pass, the Keeper there joyfully said to him, "Now you are going to live in seclusion, will you please write a book for me?" Thus Laozi wrote a book of some five thousand characters, explaining the tao and virtue in two parts, and then departed. No one knows where he went to in the end.[33]

We learn from the story that the Laozi was written at the request and for the benefit of the Pass Keeper, who was, apparently, not a philosopher capable of intuitive knowledge of the mysterious tao. In order to enlighten him and the world, Laozi was confronted with the difficult task of speaking of the unspeakable and describing the indescribable. As the commentator Wei Yuan (1794-1856) explains,

> The tao cannot be manifested through language, nor be found by following its trace in name. At the coercive request of the Pass Keeper, he was obliged to write the book, so he earnestly emphasized, at the very moment he began to speak, the extreme difficulty of speaking of the tao. For if it could be defined and given a name, it would then have a specific meaning, but not the omnipresent true constancy.[34]

This commentary succinctly brings out the point of the pun in the first line of the Laozi, showing that there is in Chinese a word that tries to disclose the same paradoxical

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[33] Sima Qian, Life of Laozi, quoted in Wei Yuan, Laozi benyi [The Original Meaning of the Laozi], p. v; in vol. 3 of Zhuzi jicheng [Collection of Classics].

[34] Laozi benyi [The Original Meaning of the Laozi], p. 1.

relationship between thinking and speaking as we find in the logos and the whole Western problematic of inner ratio versus outer oratio, and that this paradoxical relationship is laid out clearly in one of the most important ancient texts of the Chinese philosophical tradition. Thus Laozi emphasizes, at the very beginning of his writing, the inadequacy and even futility of writing, and he does so by playing on the two meanings of tao: the tao as thinking denies the tao as speaking, and yet the two are remarkably interlocked in one and the same word. According to Laozi, then, the moment an internally grasped conception gets outside as a verbal expression, it loses its plenitude or, in Laozi's term, constancy (chang). The tao, like the Platonic idea, is constant and invariable; so in the second sentence, Laozi claims that no concrete and changeable name can do justice to constancy. We may recall that for Laozi tao is not a name and is forever nameless. Similarly, in the seventh philosophical epistle, Plato maintains that "no intelligent man will ever be so bold as to put into language those things which his reason has contemplated, especially not into a form that is unalterable. . . . Names, I maintain, are in no case stable" (Epistle vii, 343, p. 1590). "This passage," says Qian Zhongshu after quoting it, "may almost be translated to annotate the Laozi" (GZB, 2:410). There is indeed no reason why Plato should not be considered as in harmonious company with Laozi in the contemplation of the logos or the tao, considering that for both philosophers

and the traditions they represent, thinking and language are conceived as set to such positions that their relationship may be indicated in terms of such conceptual opposites like inner / outer, intuition / expression, signified / signifier, and so on and so forth. Moreover, for both philosophers and the traditions they represent, writing is even more suspicious and less adequate than the spoken word as a vehicle of conveying the inner thinking.

According to Derrida, metaphysical conceptualization always proceeds by hierarchies: "In a classical philosophical opposition we are not dealing with the peaceful coexistence of a vis-à-vis, but rather with a violent hierarchy. One of the two terms governs the other (axiologically, logically, etc.), or has the upper hand."[35] In the case of language, then, the metaphysical hierarchy is established when meaning dominates speech and speech dominates writing. Derrida finds such a hierarchy in the Western tradition since the very beginning in Plato and Aristotle, especially in the notion of phonetic writing as the first and primary signifier:

> If, for Aristotle, for example, "spoken words (ta en te phone) are the symbols of mental experience (pathemata tes psyches) and written words are the symbols of spoken words" (De interpretatione, 1, 16a 3) it is because the voice, producer of the first symbols, has a relationship of essential and immediate proximity with the mind (OG, p. 11).

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[35] Positions, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 41.

This Aristotelian hierarchy seems to apply, however, not only to phonetic writing but to nonphonetic as well. When we look at the oldest Chinese dictionary, the Shuowen jiezi (second century A. D.), we find a similar hierarchy in the very definition of "word" (ci), which is described as "meaning inside and speech outside." In the appendixes to one of the ancient Chinese classics, the Book of Changes, we find a much earlier and even more clear formulation of this hierarchy: "Writing cannot fully convey the speech, and speech cannot fully convey the meaning."[36] Here the debasement of writing is based on the same considerations as in the West: written words are secondary signifiers; they are further removed than speech from what is conceived in the interiority of the mind, and they constitute a dead and empty shell from which the living voice is absent. "The epoch of the logos thus debases writing considered as mediation of mediation and as a fall into the exteriority of meaning" (OG, pp. 12-3). Exactly! And that is why the wheelwright in the Zhuangzi told Duke Huan that "what you are reading, my lord, is nothing but the dregs of the ancients."[37] For Zhuangzi as for Aristotle, words are external and dispens-

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[36] Zhouyi zhengyi [The Book of Changes with Exegesis], 70c, in Shisan jing zhushu [Thirteen Classics with Annotations], 1:82.

[37] Zhuangzi (369?-286? B. C.), Zhuangzi jishi [Variorum Edition of the Zhuangzi], ed. Guo Qingfan, in vol. 3 of Zhuzi jicheng [Collection of Classics], xiii, p. 217. Further references to this edition, abbreviated as Z, will be to chapter and page numbers.

able signs; they should be cast aside once their meaning, content, or signified has been extracted. Thus we have this beautiful passage from Zhuangzi that finds many an echo in classical Chinese poetry and philosophy:

> It is for the fish that the trap exists; once you've got the fish, you forget the trap. It is for the hare that the snare exists; once you've got the hare, you forget the snare. It is for the meaning that the word exists; once you've got the meaning, you forget the word. Where can I find the man who will forget words so that I can have a word with him? (Z, xxvi, p. 407)

The man Zhuangzi calls for should indeed be the ideal addressee of a philosophical message, the perfect receptacle of the tao or logos that keeps the inner meaning but not the outer form, a man who forgets the word as expression but remembers what is grasped within. We may compare this with Heraclitus' fragment 36, "Listening not to me but to the logos," and with Ludwig Wittgenstein's metaphor at the end of his Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus that the reader who has comprehended his propositions should throw them away as he should, so to speak, "throw away the ladder, after he has climbed up on it."[38] It becomes obvious then that not only the dichotomy of meaning and word, content and form, intention and expres-

[38] Heraclitus, The Art and Thought of Heraclitus: An Edition of the Fragments with Translation and Commentary, trans. and ed. Charles H. Kahn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), p. 45; Ludwig Wittgenstein, Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus, trans. C. K. Ogden (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983), 6.54, p. 189; hereafter abbreviated as TLP.

sion, etc., is deeply rooted in both the Chinese and Western traditions, but that the two terms always stand in a hierarchical relation. The metaphysical hierarchy of thinking, speech, and writing, therefore, exists not only in the West but in the East as well, and logocentrism does not just inhabit the Western way of thinking, but constitutes the very way of thinking itself. In fact, precisely because we find in both China and the West the same metaphysical hierarchy and shared concerns about thinking and expression, we can legitimately bring together literary texts and critical views from Chinese and Western traditions, and try to uncover some basic ideas, concepts, and principles that underlie both of them. Without the common ground of such shared concerns, it would be impossible for us to conceive of literary hermeneutics from the perspective of East-West comparative studies.

CHAPTER II. RAID ON THE INARTICULATE

I sometimes hold it half a sin
  To put in words the grief I feel;
  For words, like Nature, half reveal
And half conceal the Soul within.

Alfred Tennyson, In Memoriam, v

elle balance
Sur le plumage instrumental,
Musicienne du silence.

she balances
on the plumage instrumental,
musician of silence.

Stéphane Mallarmé, Sainte

1. THE IRONIC PATTERN

We start this chapter with some of Ludwig Wittgenstein's propositions because in them the central issues that concern us here, i. e., thinking, speaking, silence, etc., are so well formulated that it would be difficult to find any other formulation that may claim to have the same depth of insight put in such a highly condensed form. In the preface to Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus, Wittgenstein sums up the whole point of his book in this famous statement: "What can be said at all can be said clearly; and whereof one cannot speak thereof one must be silent."[1] Underlying this statement, we probably sense

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[1] TLP, p. 27. This point is reiterated in the middle and again at the very end of the book. See 4.116, p. 7; 79, p. 189.

the same suspicion of the inadequacy of language as we also find in the writings of Plato, Laozi, and others, since Wittgenstein says explicitly that the limit drawn here is "not to thinking, but to the expression of thoughts" (TLP, p. 27). According to Bertrand Russell, Wittgenstein is here concerned with an ideal, logically perfect language which has eliminated the source of ambiguity and confusion in daily speech, namely, the gaps between thinking and expression. The business of philosophy, Wittgenstein maintains, is to "make clear and delimit sharply the thoughts which otherwise are, as it were, opaque and blurred" (TLP, 4.112, p. 77). But very little of what we usually say lives up to the standard of the ideal language. Much of our talk, including what we say about the good and the beautiful, i. e., ethics and aesthetics, are opaque, blurred, and, from the vantage point of the ideal language, senseless.[2] The only thing that can be said with precision, the "totality of true propositions," says Wittgenstein, is "the totality of the natural sciences," i. e., something that does not depend on language for its effectiveness but shows its presence extralinguistically (TLP, 4.11, p. 75). And yet, philosophy is not a natural science, so eventually even philosophy and the whole of logic must fall under the inexpressible. Following Fritz Mauthner, Wittgenstein declares

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[2] See TLP, 6.421, p. 183. Also see Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe. 3rd edition (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1968), 77, p. 36.

that all philosophy is "Critique of language," although "not at all in Mauthner's sense" (TLP, 4.0031, p. 63). Unless the logic of language is understood through such a Sprachkritik, most philosophical propositions and questions can only be "senseless" (TLP, 4.003, p. 63). What, then, are the things that can be said at all? Or, to put it differently, what are the things that can be thought and, through thinking, find their clear expression? Wittgenstein insists that they can only be "the propositions of natural science, i. e. something that has nothing to do with philosophy" (TLP, 6.53, p. 189).

Russell feels quite puzzled, for Wittgenstein's view would lead to the inevitable conclusion that "nothing correct can be said in philosophy. Every philosophical proposition is bad grammar, and the best that we can hope to achieve by philosophical discussion is to lead people to see that philosophical discussion is a mistake." But, Russell goes on to say, "after all, Mr Wittgenstein manages to say a good deal about what cannot be said, thus suggesting to the sceptical reader that possibly there may be some loophole through a hierarchy of languages, or by some other exit."[3]

It seems an inevitable irony that the philosopher always has to say a good deal about what he believes to be ineffable and to write a good deal to elucidate what is supposedly absent in writing. Instead of being silent, Wittgenstein writes

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[3] TLP, Russell's introduction, pp. 11, 22.

about the inexpressible in epigrammatic propositions which he acknowledges to be ultimately senseless (unsinnig) and urges the reader to throw away once he has understood them. Laozi composes a book of five thousand characters to speak of the tao that cannot be tao-ed [spoken of], and Zhuangzi tries to demonstrate the ineffable in a dazzling display of metaphors, parables, and images, while searching for the man who will forget his words once he has got the meaning. The loophole or exit Russell mentions turns out to be nothing but speaking and writing, i. e., something these philosophers did not mean to use but all ended up using profusely. They all have to say that they mean to be silent, and they all have to write to declare that they do not trust writing. Yet, nothing abides but writing; even the debasement of writing has to survive in writing. Philosophers' anxiety over writing begins with their misgivings concerning the discrepancy between thoughts and words, especially words used figuratively, but in the end, they all use words, and use them in all kinds of rhetorical ways. The dream of a univocal language without metaphors, as Derrida says, remains a "dream at the heart of philosophy."[4] Derrida attempts to expose the emptiness of this dream, the philosopher's futile search for a language of unmediated presence, by quoting from Anatole France that "the very meta-

[4] Derrida, "White Mythology," in Margins of Philosophy, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982), p. 268; hereafter abbreviated as MP.

physicians who think to escape the world of appearances are constrained to live perpetually in allegory. A sorry lot of poets, they dim the colours of the ancient fables, and are themselves but gatherers of fables. They produce white mythology."[5]

Indeed, in using images and analogies etc., philosophical discourse at times verges on the intense metaphoricity of poetry. The epigrammatic form of Wittgenstein's writing has a touch of wit and raciness reminiscent of Schiller's aphorisms or Novalis' fragments. Zhuangzi produces numerous metaphors in quick succession, as he himself describes metaphorically, using words like goblets to be filled or emptied as the occasion requires. His writing is highly literary, packed with "airy and fantastic sayings, absurd and bombastic phrases, and words without ends or boundaries" (Z, xxxiii, p. 474). Even Plato, who accuses poets of lying and banishes them from his ideal state, expounds the Socratic philosophy in the form of dialogues which Aristotle classifies as a literary genre "between poetry and prose."[6] In many ways, Aristotle's Poetics is a defence of poetry against Plato's rationalistic attack, and ever since the Renaissance, apologists of poetry often claim

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[5] A. France, The Garden of Epicurus, quoted in Derrida, MP, p. 213.

[6] On Poets 2, in Aristotle, Poetics, trans. Richard Janko (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), p. 56. In Poetics 47b, Aristotle already includes "the Socratic dialogues" in the various literary genres for which there is no general term in Greek. See ibid., p. 2.

that Plato himself is a poet, for "whosoever well considereth shall find," as Sir Philip Sidney contends, "that in the body of his work, though the inside and strength were philosophy, the skin as it were and beauty depended most of poetry."[7] In much the same vein, Shelley also claims that "Plato was essentially a poet," for "the truth and splendour of his imagery, and the melody of his language, is the most intense that it is possible to conceive."[8] Sidney still locates the metaphoricity of Plato's writing in the frame of an inner / outer dichotomy, considering it as the mere outside. But before him, Dante already realizes that metaphor is more than just embedded in the texture of philosophical discourse: it may indeed be said to constitute the very philosophical discourse itself. In his well-known "Letter to Can Grande," Dante argues that it is metaphor that enables the philosopher to express thoughts that must otherwise remain silent and inexpressible:

> For we see many things with the intellect for which there are no verbal signs. This fact Plato makes plain enough by the use he makes of metaphors in his books: for he saw many things by the light of the intellect which he was unable to express in the appropriate words.[9]

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[7] An Apology for Poetry, ed. Forrest G. Robinson (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1970), p. 8.

[8] A Defence of Poetry, in Shelley's Critical Prose, ed. Bruce R. McElderry (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1967), p. 9.

[9] Literary Criticism of Dante Alighieri, trans. R. S. Haller (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1973), p. 110.

It is through images, metaphors, analogies, etc. that philosophical conceptions take graspable shape and become intelligible. We can almost say that metaphor, in philosophy as in poetry, "gives to aery nothing / A local habitation and a name."[10] The unnamed is inconceivable, and philosophy as such exists only in words and names. Despite Zhuangzi's advice to forget the word, it is ironically his words that have made him best remembered, for many people read Zhuangzi as one of the greatest prose writers in classical Chinese literature: they admire the grandeur of his imagination and the beauty of his language, even though they do not care about his Taoist ideology. That is to say, people tend to remember his words while forgetting his meaning, and Zhuangzi's advice functions against itself as a poetic trope, an irony. His philosophy of self-effacement, like that of Laozi, is thus overturned by his own writing.

Zhuangzi's highly figurative text shows clearly how the play of metaphor blurs the usual distinction between philosophy and literature. In this particular case, however, the mythology emerging from the text is by no means white, but of a very robust and sanguine color. Neither is Zhuangzi unaware of the irreducible metaphoricity of his writing, but he would see it as an unfortunate necessity. Hui Shi, a rival philos-

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[10] Shakespeare, A Midsummer Night's Dream, V.i.16; The Riverside Shakespeare, ed. G. Blakemore Evans et al. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974). Further references to this edition will be included in the text.

opher, challenges Zhuangzi that he does, after all, use a good deal of words despite his protest that words are quite useless. In response to that challenge, Zhuangzi answers with typical witty irony: "But you must know they are useless, and then you can talk about their use" (Z, xxvi, p. 403). He seems to argue that once you know that the use of words is provisional, you are freed, as it were, from the infatuation with words, and are thus capable of using words as expedient "non-words." "Speaking those non-words," says Zhuangzi, "you may talk all your life without having said anything. Otherwise, even if you never speak in all your life, you may still have said too much" (Z, xxvii, p. 409). So the issue at stake is not so much speaking itself as the right kind of medium one uses in speaking. But what exactly are those "non-words"? What else if not simply the irreducible metaphors necessary for bringing the unnamed and unnameable into existence, metaphors the philosopher has to smuggle back into his writing after he has denied their usefulness? When Zhuangzi was calling for the man who would forget his words, he seemed to know that he was never to find such a man. We may recall that Confucius, in spite of his wish to be silent, nevertheless acknowledges the necessity of speaking in the transmission of what the sages have already said in antiquity. Much as they would desire a transparent, wordless transmission of truth and knowledge, philosophers thus find themselves immersed in language just like poets.

Apparently, the desire for silence will find catharsis in an ironic pattern: for the more one craves for silence, the more desperately one must speak and write. In a way, Richard Rorty argues that it is recognition of this ironic pattern that differentiates deconstruction from traditional philosophy. "Philosophical writing, for Heidegger as for the Kantians," he puts it summarily, "is really aimed at putting an end to writing. For Derrida, writing always leads to more writing, and more, and still more."[11] Indeed, we may say that perhaps Zhuangzi, by using words as "non-words," also recognized this ironic pattern, offering philosophers an excuse to recuperate writing, a licence to proliferate writing even to infinity, because Zhuangzi's use of "non-words" is essentially a move to reclaim language, to acknowledge the inevitable metaphoricity of all philosophical discourse.

"Metaphor," Derrida writes in summing up the traditional view, "is determined by philosophy as a provisional loss of meaning, an economy of the proper without irreparable damage, a certainly inevitable detour, but also a history with its sights set on, and within the horizon of, the circular reappropriation of literal, proper meaning" (MP, p. 270). He rejects such a view as a distortion of the nature of both metaphor and of philosophy, maintaining that not only our language--which philosophers also use--is a storehouse of dead

[11] "Philosophy as a Kind of Writing," p. 145.

metaphors, but the very concepts of philosophy, in their origin and history, are also metaphorical. Words denoting spiritual or abstract notions usually derive from words originally signifying sensuous objects. Thus Vico formulates "the universal principle of etymology in all languages: words are carried over from bodies and from the properties of bodies to signify the institutions of the mind and spirit."[12] Interestingly, there is a very similar formulation of the same principle in the appendix to the Book of Changes, where it is said that the ancient king Pao Xi invented the hexagrams by observing the configuration of heaven and earth, and imitating the pattern of traces left by birds and animals on the ground. "By taking hint near at hand from his body and farther away from external things, he then created the hexagrams to make the Virtue of gods comprehensible and the nature of all things known in signs."[13] Evidently, in both Vico and the Chinese classic, signs and words are recognized as originally signifying some-

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[12] The New Science, trans. Thomas Bergin and Max Harold Fisch (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1976), p. 78.

[13] Zhouyi zhengyi [The Book of Changes with Exegesis], 74b, in Ruan Yuan ed., Shisan jing zhushu [Thirteen Classics with Annotations], 1:86. The hexagrams are highly abstract signs consist of six horizontal lines in different combinations. In ancient Chinese thought, they were believed to represent all things in the universe and their relations, signs that imply the binary relationship of the yin and the yang, the principles of the feminine and of the masculine. The notion of hexagrams originating in following the patterns of trace in nature and in using the sensuous to signify the spiritual is later carried over to account for the origin of writing, the creation of Chinese ideograms.

thing sensuous, especially the human body, out of which the spiritual or abstract meanings develop as transferred, figurative, hence metaphorical. As long as philosophy is written in words, it can never rid itself of all metaphors to secure an absolute clarity. "How could a piece of knowledge or a language be properly clear or obscure?" Derrida comments. "Now, all the concepts which have operated in the definition of metaphor always have an origin and an efficacity that are themselves `metaphorical'" (MP, p. 252).

Derrida, however, does not keep the issue simply within the range of etymology. He tries, rather, to reveal the metaphoricity of essential philosophical concepts by reading Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, and Hegel. He calls our attention especially to the perennial heliotrope, which appears so often in philosophical texts. Descartes's hyperbolic doubt, for instance, put in question not only those ideas that have a sensory origin but also abstract ideas, and he refused to take any of them as the proper foundation of philosophical reasoning. Descartes, however, found himself unable to doubt the "natural light" that enabled him to "see" the fact that he was doubting. And yet, Derrida argues, what is "natural light" if not another use of the heliotrope? To conceive of the mind as some kind of an intellectual light is of course making a metaphor. Thus the Cartesian cogito and the whole edifice of rationalist philosophy are found to have been built squarely on metaphorical grounds. "Metaphor," Derrida maintains, "is less

in the philosophical text (and in the rhetorical text coordinated with it) than the philosophical text is within metaphor" (MP, p. 258). Since metaphor is so closely intertwined with and within the texture of philosophy, it is impossible to separate it from philosophy, and no ontology will ever be able to reduce its play to the meaning of the proper speech. For philosophy, therefore, any attempt to efface metaphor would be suicidal, for the death of metaphor, Derrida declares, will also be "the death of philosophy" (MP, p. 271).

2. FROM SPRACHKRITIK TO MYSTICISM

From Wittgenstein's imperative to keep silent to Zhuangzi's use of "non-words" as a licence to speak without saying, we see philosophy wrestling with its own metaphoricity, trying in vain to get rid of it. Against this background, the effort to rehabilitate metaphoricity and to rescue it from the oblivion philosophy tries to put it in certainly sets deconstruction off strikingly from the tradition of metaphysics it severely criticizes.

Without discounting the original contributions of this deconstructive valorization of metaphor, however, we may note that Fritz Mauthner, in his project to carry out a consistent critique of language at the turn of the century, already adumbrated the view that philosophy is nothing but language and, as such, is by nature metaphorical. It is important to real-

ize, Mauthner maintains, "that understanding or human thinking or language is metaphorical through and through" (daß der Verstand oder das menschliche Denken oder die Sprache durch und durch metaphorisch ist).[14] Like Vico or the legendary account in the Book of Changes, Mauthner holds that signs, words, and their meanings all originate in sensory experiences of the outside world, including observations of the human body; they are therefore incapable of adequately representing the inner experiences of the mind:

> Es ist nichts im menschlichen Verstande oder in der Sprache, was nicht vorher in den Sinnen gewesen ist; und die Sinne, wie gesagt, blicken nicht nach innen. Es gibt kein Wort der Sprache, welches nicht aus Beobachtungen der Körperwelt, zu denen auch der eigene Leib und seine Erlebnisse gehören, entstanden wäre. (KS, 1:235-36)
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> [Nothing in the human mind or in language has not previously been in the senses; and the senses, as I said, do not look inward. There is not one word in language that did not originate in observations of the physical world, including our own body and bodily experiences.]

Since we have no adequate means to describe our inner experiences, so Mauthner argues, psychology as a discipline is impossible. Moreover, to the extent that it claims to be the "self-knowledge of human intellect," philosophy is also impossible (KS, 1:704). As philosophical propositions use a metaphorical language to talk about the metaphysical, they are

[14] Beiträge zu einer Kritik der Sprache, 3 vols. 3rd edition (Leipzig: Felix Meiner, 1922-23), 2:463; hereafter abbreviated as KS.

simply senseless. Only through a rigorous critique of language, Mauthner declares, can philosophy make significant progress. In fact, philosophy ought to be nothing but such a critique. "In the beginning was the Word." Mauthner starts his Kritik der Sprache by quoting the first verse of St. John. But human beings would for ever remain in the beginning and their knowledge of the world for ever arrested from growing if they are still bound to the word. Miraculously, the word has an uncanny power over us, says Mauthner; whoever wants to step out of its spell and make progress in thinking "must free himself from the word and word-superstition, must try to deliver his world from the tyranny of language" (KS, 1:1). The goal of his critique is precisely liberation from such a tyranny of words; it will eventually lead to the negation of all words and linguistic expressions. Mauthner characterizes his own philosophy as "out of the death-wish of thinking, a suicide of language" (KS, 1:713), for to be consistent in such a critique, one must give up language altogether. Whoever still sets out to write a book out of his "hunger for words, love of words, and vanity of words" cannot yet accomplish the task of this liberation. Whoever carries out an uncompromising critique of language must destroy the very language with which he carries out the critique, like smashing the ladder after he has climbed up on it--a memorable image Mauthner borrowed from Sextus Empiricus, and Wittgenstein in turn borrowed from him at the end of his Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus:

> Will ich emporklimmen in der Sprachkritik, die das wichtigste Geschäft der denkenden Menschheit ist, so muß ich die Sprache hinter mir und vor mir und in mir vernichten von Schritt zu Schritt, so muß ich jede Sprosse der Leiter zertrümmern, indem ich sie betrete. Wer folgen will, der zimmere die Sprossen wieder, um sie abermals zu zertrümmern. (KS, 1:1-2)
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> [If I want to climb upwards in the critique of language, which is the most important business of the thinking mankind, I must then destroy the language behind me, before me, and in me step by step, I must then smash each rung of the ladder on which I just stepped. Whoever wishes to follow will fix the rungs again only to smash them yet once more.]

As Allan Janik and Stephen Toulmin show convincingly, Mauthner's critique of language forms part of the Viennese milieu of the 1890s and 1900s, within which Wittgenstein's Tractatus, a key work in modern philosophy but also one of the most enigmatic ones, becomes comprehensible. They read the Tractatus, among other things, as a response to Mauthner, an effort "to defend the adequacy of language as a scientific instrument from Mauthner's skepticism."[15] But in his later works, when he no longer believed in the self-evident correlation between language and reality as he had posited in the Tractatus, Wittgenstein "revived many positions and arguments already put forward by Mauthner in 1901."[16] In his study of Mauthner's Sprachkritik, Gershon Weiler also argues that both Mauthner and Wittgenstein "see the critique of language as an

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[15] Wittgenstein's Vienna (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1973), p. 197.

[16] Ibid., p. 232.

inquiry into the limits of what can be and what cannot be said." The two philosophers differ in their opinions so far as natural science is concerned, but they both share the view that ultimately philosophy belongs to the unsayable, and they both "conclude their works by a commitment to mysticism."[17]

The quintessential mystic moment, as Martin Buber notes, is that of a union with God, a truly ineffable moment of ecstasy, when "one is removed from the commotion, removed into the most silent, speechless heavenly kingdom--removed even from language."[18] Admittedly, Mauthner's critique of language operates totally outside the concerns of religious mysticism, but it leads to a mystic moment of speechlessness, as it steers "through a mistrust of language to silence."[19] We have Mauthner's own testimony:

> Sprachkritik war mein erstes und ist mein letztes Wort. Nach rückwärts blickend ist Sprachkritik alles zermalmende Skepsis, nach vorwärts blickend, mit Illusionen spielend, ist sie eine Sehnsucht nach Einheit, ist sie Mystik.
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> [Critique of language was my first word and is still my last. Looking backward, critique of language is all-crushing skepticism. Looking forward and playing with illusions, it is a longing for unity, it is mysticism.][20]

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[17] Mauthner's Critique of Language (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), pp. 301, 302.

[18] Ecstatic Confessions, trans. Esther Cameron (New York: Harper & Row, 1985), p. 5.

[19] Weiler, Mauthner's Critique of Language, p. 296.

[20] Der Atheismus und seine Geschichte im Abendlande, 4 vols. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1922-23), 4:447.

Nevertheless, Mauthner calls his own mysticism "godless" in order to differentiate it from other kinds of mysticism, for the concept of God, like all other concepts, when put in the perspective of his critical theory, is only a word without substance. Critique of language must therefore lead to the negation of theology as well as philosophy, to the destruction of all concepts and words. The final result can only be a moment of complete silence wherein nothing is conceptualized, nothing is said. This is the moment when one realizes, as Laozi puts it, that "the one who knows does not speak; the one who speaks does not know" (L, lvi.128, p. 34); or as Zhuangzi remarks, "to explain is not as effective as to keep silent"; "The tao cannot be heard, what is heard is not tao. It cannot be seen, what is seen is not tao. It cannot be spoken, what is spoken is not tao" (Z, xxii, pp. 326, 330). In fact, it is Mauthner himself who cited these words from Laozi and Zhuangzi and referred to tao as "the puzzling word (Rätselwort), coined or used two thousand and five hundred years ago by the Chinese sage Laozi to capture in a human sound the most profound self-communion of the East, the feeling of unity with a world without God."[21] His reflections on the meaning of tao are rather limited and ill-informed, but we must admit that he has a remarkable insight in seeing an affinity between tao and logos, and claiming to "discover in Tao a primeval critique of lan-

[21] Ibid., 4:444-5.

guage (in Tao eine uralte Sprachkritik zu entdecken); for Laozi says: `The name that can be named is not the constant name.'"[22]

Mystics, whether religious or godless, in the East or the West, all claim that the feeling of unity they experience and the spiritual reality they have come to know are so unique that they cannot be put in words. Meister Eckhart, for example, distinguishes between word as outside expression and the divine Word as inward silence when he claims, "St. Paul said to Timothy: `Beloved, preach the word!' Did he mean the audible word that beats the air? Certainly not! He referred to the inborn, secret word that lies hidden in the soul."[23] In the Buddhist tradition, inward silence is also held as the state of mind to be achieved at the final moment of enlightenment, for the nature of things or dharmas is beyond language, as a great second-century Buddhist thinker Nagarjuna pointed out. In order to attain to perfect wisdom, one must be free from the habitual clinging to words because such wisdom does not transmit in language, but will "put an end to the entire network of words (prapañca)."[24] So Buddha, as Nagarjuna notes,

[22] Wörterbuch der Philosophie: Neue Beiträge zu einer Kritik der Sprache, 2 vols. (München: Georg Müller, 1910), 2:468, s. v. "Tao".

[23] Meister Eckhart: A Modern Translation, trans. Raymond Bernard Blakney (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1941), p. 111.

[24] K. Venkata Ramanan, Nagarjuna's Philosophy as Presented in the Maha-Prajñaparamita-Sastra (Rutland, Vermont: C. E. Tuttle, 1966), p. 128.

"delighted at heart in keeping silent" when approached by the uninitiated with questions, for "He knew that it is difficult for ordinary minds to comprehend the profound dharma."[25] With so much emphasis laid on intuitive apprehension, transmission of wisdom in Buddhism becomes very difficult, and teaching virtually impossible. A Chan (or Zen) master would thus prefer "a special transmission outside the scripture," with "no dependence upon words and letters." That, as D. T. Suzuki notes, "sums up all that is claimed by Zen as religion."[26] And yet, teaching without the employment of language is certainly characteristic not just of Zen, but also of Taoist teaching, which is set forth by Laozi as "teaching without words" (L, ii.6, p. 2). In fact, it is an attitude shared by all mystics, a critique of language shaped by the very sense of the mysterious:

> It is especially the cult of mysticism, in all ages and among all peoples, that grapples again and again with this intellectual double problem--the task of comprehending the Divine in its totality, in its highest inward reality, and yet avoiding any particularity of name or image. Thus all mysticism is directed toward a world beyond language, a world of silence. As Meister Eckhardt has written, God is the "simple ground, the still desert, the simple silence."[27]

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[25] Ibid., p. 274.

[26] Essays in Zen Buddhism, 1st series (London: Luzac, 1927), p. 7.

[27] Ernst Cassirer, Language and Myth, trans. Susanne K. Langer (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1946), p. 74.

The critique of language, however, whether in Mauthner's or Wittgenstein's sense, must be carried out in and with language, thus their works exemplify, of necessity, the irony of all mysticism, i. e., the irony of silence. The words we use may be inadequate for whatever purpose they are meant to serve, but they are the only means of conveying what we have to say, and the mystic who negates words has to use words to say what he holds as beyond language. Mauthner is of course aware of this contradiction when he declares: "I shall try once more to say the unsayable, to express with poor words whatever I have to give pious unbelievers in nominalistic mysticism, in skeptical mysticism."[28] He uses a great deal of words as if they were Zhuangzi's "non-words," continuously turning mystic silence into thick volumes of philosophical writing. It seems that mystic silence, whether the religious or the linguistic kind, really generates a strong repressed desire to speak, and that its fulfillment must follow the ironic pattern as we have delineated it, for the mystic is always torn between the plenitude of silence and the human need for communication. As Martin Buber remarks, "Even the innermost experience is not kept safe from the drive to expression." The ecstatic "must speak, because the Word burns in him," because "he wants to create a memorial for ecstasy which leaves no traces, to tow the timeless into the harbor

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[28] Wörterbuch der Philosophie, 2:131, s. v. "Mystik".

of time; he wants to make the unity without multiplicity into the unity of all multiplicity."[29]

For philosophers and mystics, the necessity to reconcile unity and multiplicity and to catch silence in speech poses an insoluble problem. The nature of things or the ecstatic experience may remain forever ineffable, but philosophers and mystics will still try to approximate to it by all means, allowing their effort at saying the unsayable to move incessantly from the depth of reticence to the peak of loquacity. Zhuangzi's "non-words" provide one way out of this metaphysical-metaphorical dilemma, so do the Buddhist prajñapti or "provisional names". Nagarjuna maintains that one can speak neither of the positive nor of the negative, nor even of the negation of the negative, but one can speak of all these when speaking with provisional names. His philosophy is known as the Middle Way (madhyama pratipat) because it transcends the absolute by way of the provisional, subsuming all binary categories under an ambivalent non-category. Thus, beyond silence and speech, the Nagarjunian provisional names build up a sort of mental ladder upon which we may climb beyond our finite, historically limited understanding towards ultimate infinity. Apparently, the Middle Way, as Venkata Ramanan puts it, is the way "to recognize the possibility of determining things differently from different standpoints and to recognize

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[29] Ecstatic Confessions, pp. 7, 9, 10.

that these determinations cannot be seized as absolute. This is the way that realizes the relativity of specific views and of determinate entities."[30] The Middle Way, in other words, will free the wayfarer from extremes and absolutes by acknowledging the local values of different views and positions without imposing commitment to any one of them. Absolute silence for Nagarjuna would be as untenable as blind adherence to words; thus with provisional names, one is able to attain to upaya or the skilful non-clinging, the ability to reclaim language as something useful, though expedient.

No matter how they are called, "non-words" or "provisional names," these are all strategies mystics in the East employ to justify their use of language, even the excessive verbosity so often found in their writings. In Western mysticism, as Karl Vossler observes, there is also a similar move. The mystics insist, on the one hand, that "no name fits God, because he stands above all things that have names," while on the other, that "since he is the creator of all things, all names of all things could be applied to him." As a result, "mystics have never tired of glorifying God as the highest and the lowest, the greatest and the smallest, the day and the night, all and nothing; they have surrounded him with a wild dance of words where each negates the one before it."[31] These

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[30] Nagarjuna's Philosophy, pp. 50-1.

[31] The Spirit of Language in Civilization, trans. Oscar Oeser (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1932), p. 33.

words cannot but remind us of what Zhuangzi says about the tao, that if tao is nowhere, then it is everywhere; if nothing contains it in totality, then everything bears it in part. When pressed for naming the site of tao, Zhuangzi declares, in a deliberate decrescendo, that it exists in ants, in weeds, in earthen ware, even in urine and excrement (Z, xxii, p. 326). Commenting on such moves, Qian Zhongshu sees the circular cancellation of words as a unique method mystics use in speaking of the ineffable. Citing copious examples from Buddhist sutras, Taoist books, and Western mystic writings, he shows clearly that anonymy and polynomy are complementary to one another in all mystic articulations. Perhaps the most revealing of these examples is an interesting passage quoted from a Taoist book, Guan yinzi (c. 3rd century B. C.), where the circular negation of words is compared to the precarious balance kept among three creatures: the cricket, the snake, and the frog, which, according to an old superstition, were believed to be deadly one to the other:

> The cricket preys on the snake, the snake preys on the frog, and the frog preys on the cricket: one preying on the next. So do the words of the sages: they speak of the imperfection of being and non-being, then they speak of the imperfection of the negation of being and non-being, and then they speak of the imperfection of the negation of that negation. They are, so to speak, sawing up words; only the good ones will leave no word behind.[32]

[32] Quoted in Qian Zhongshu, GZB, 2:457; also 1:13.

From this, Qian Zhongshu maintains, we should see the crucial difference in the use of words and images between the mystic or the philosopher on the one hand and the poet on the other. In the Book of Changes, a set of archetypal images are used to help bring out the meaning of the hexagrams, of which Qian (☰), for example, is symbolized by horse, head, sky, father, etc.; Kun (☷), by cow, belly, earth, mother, etc.; and Zhen (☳), by dragon, foot, thunder, the eldest son, etc. The meaning of Qian cannot be put in language, but it is something common to horse, head, sky, father, etc.; and the meaning of Kun is suggested likewise by cow, belly, earth, mother, etc. What Qian is to Kun is analogous to what horse is to cow, head to belly, sky to earth, and the like. Each of the images in isolation does not seem to make much sense, but when juxtaposed, something gradually emerges as a shared quality or property: something strong and masculine about Qian, or meek and feminine about Kun, becomes conceivable. Yet the meaning of Qian is not exhausted by masculinity, nor is Kun mere femininity. None of these images is really necessary or able to claim to have a natural relation with the concept it helps to articulate: Qian is neither horse nor any of the other images for suggesting its meaning, nor is Kun a cow or mother. All the images illustrate or symbolize the concept, but they all differ from its totality and from one another, thereby they negate and cancel one another out, quite like the cricket, the snake, and the frog, in their different symbol-

ism. Insofar as they are all figures and metaphors, images can do no better than words in getting to the ultimate and unmediated signified. To grasp a concept, one has to go beyond the image, to throw it away, as it were, and to forget it. The advice of Zhuangzi to forget words thus applies to images as well, for images are just as provisional and dispensable as words: if words cancel one another out, so do the images. For the hexagram Qian, horse may be replaced by head, sky, or father; and for Kun, cow may be replaced by belly, earth, or mother. Such replacement or mutual cancellation indeed characterizes words and images in philosophical discourse, but things are quite different in the poetic use of metaphors and images. Words and images in lines from the Book of Poetry, such as "Neigh, neigh cries the horse," or "Dewy damp are ears of the cow," as Qian Zhongshu points out emphatically, cannot possibly allow such replacement. Thus, horse differs from horse, and cow from cow: "the image the philosopher wants us to forget once we've got the word, and the word he wants us to forget once we've got the meaning, are precisely what the poet cherishes and relishes" (GZB, 1:14-15). This crucial difference between philosophical (nonliterary) and literary discourses is also clearly pointed out by Wittgenstein when he says:

> We speak of understanding a sentence in the sense in which it can be replaced by another which says the same; but also in the sense in which it cannot be replaced by any other. (Any more than one musical theme can be replaced by another.)

> In the one case the thought in the sentence is something common to different sentences; in the other, something that is expressed only by these words in these positions. (Understanding a poem.)[33]

We may very well agree with Derrida that "metaphor seems to involve the usage of philosophical language in its entirety" (MP, p. 209). Given the above distinction, however, it should also become clear that we must take into consideration the different functions of metaphor and the different degrees of its irreducibility in literary and philosophical texts, as well as the different ways those texts demand to be read. Words and images in mystic or philosophical writings are like blurred traces or a kind of palimpsest, through which one tries hopelessly to see the ultimate signified. It is only in poetry or literary texts at large that words and images become truly irreducible, for we may paraphrase a philosophical proposition to get the tenor, but change the wording or the specific sequence of words in a poem ever so slightly, what makes it uniquely poetic will immediately be affected, altered, even completely destroyed. Poetry, as Robert Frost's often quoted definition has it, is what gets lost in translation. This is, however, not meant to be a disparagement of the literary value of translation, but rather an affirmation of what we have indicated above, that is, the impossibility of replacement of words in a poetic text. Therefore, Frost's definition should

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[33] Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations, 531, pp. 143-44.

read, as Stanley Burnshaw remarks, "The poetry of the original is the poetry that gets lost from verse or prose in translation."[34]

3. THE TONGUE-TIED MUSE

When Homer begins his epics by invoking the muse to help him tell the story of gods and heroes, he is making a sort of theoretical statement about the art of poetry. In a way, he is acknowledging his inability to speak or to portray actions of a gigantic proportion, the will of gods, the adventures of heroes, the course of capricious fate, and all those splendid things that make up the sublime text of an epic. He is saying that he cannot accomplish the composing of poetry without the help he now hopes to enlist from the goddess of song, and that whatever comes out of his mouth owes its origin not to the poet but to the muse, for his poems are words uttered by divine inspiration. The invocation to the muse later becomes a poetic convention, but with the passing of time, a poet with a strong sense of the belatedness of his own times, a "sentimental" poet like Friedrich Schiller, may feel very sharply that the invocation has now lost its real sense and become a meaningless gesture. Gone is the Homeric past, the "naive,"

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[34] Robert Frost Himself (New York: George Braziller, 1986), p. 123.

mythological past, when creative collaboration with gods did not seem so unthinkable,

> Da der Dichtung zauberische Hülle
> Sich noch lieblich um die Wahrheit wand.
>
> [When the magic fold of poetry
> Still charmingly wound around truth.][35]

The naive, simple, and more homogeneous past may very well be Schiller's idealizing fantasy, but he is painfully conscious of the fact that without divine power coming to his aid, it is now much more difficult for a modern poet to establish the perfect connection between reality and his own writing, which seemed once attainable in remote antiquity. Not surprisingly, it is Schiller, the great German poet, playwright, and philosopher, who has voiced the difficulty of articulation, the poet's inability to speak:

> Warum kann der lebendige Geist dem Geist nicht erscheinen?
> Spricht die Seele, so spricht, ach! schon die Seele nicht mehr.
>
> [Why cannot a living spirit to another spirit appear?
> When the soul speaks, alas! the soul's no longer speaking.][36]

The difficulty Schiller speaks about is not just a matter of technical perfection, the problem of seeking the right word, a happy turn of phrase, or le mot juste, though that is

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[35] Schiller, Die Götter Griechenlands (1788), Werke in sechs Bänden, hrsg. Alfred Brandstetter (Zürich: Stauffacher, 1967), 1:187.

[36] Tabulae votivae, "47. Sprache" (1796); ibid., 1:273.

undeniably difficult, too. It is rather a far more fundamental problem, namely, the problem of articulation or the inadequacy of all linguistic expressions, with which philosophers and mystics have been grappling all along. Schiller is of course not the only one to complain about this inadequacy, for the difficulty of articulation is indeed as old as poetry itself. No matter how hard they try, even with the "poetic licence" to do some violence to words and syntax, poets still find their actual saying less than perfect, and their written text a falling off from what they have originally conceived in the intensity of imagination. "For the mind in creation," as Shelley puts it elegantly, "is as a fading coal, which some invisible influence, like an inconstant wind, awakens to transitory brightness." And that brightness is quickly dimmed at the very moment of actual composing, for "when composition begins, inspiration is already on the decline, and the most glorious poetry that has ever been communicated to the world is probably a feeble shadow of the original conception of the Poet."[37]

Though truthfulness in the representation of reality or the expression of emotions is a perennial question in history of art, it becomes a matter of special acuteness and urgency for the theory of literature whenever the question is raised specifically as a problem of representation in language. In

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[37] A Defence of Poetry, in Shelley's Critical Prose, p. 30.

China during the 3rd and 4th centuries, in that intellectually stimulating and intriguing Wei-Jin period (220-420), there was a philosophical debate among the literati about whether words could fully convey meaning. After four hundred years of scholastic studies of the Confucian classics during the Han dynasty (206 B. C.-220) and all those repressive moralistic and utilitarian ordinances, this was a truly refreshing moment of intellectual emancipation in Chinese history when the concept of literature finally came into being not as a didactic tool for moral edification, but as expression of profound and genuine feelings, valuable in its own right. It was a time when the books of Laozi and Zhuangzi were read with rather sophisticated understanding and elicited a great deal of metaphysical discussion, when the sense of the self began to manifest in Chinese poetry along with an awareness of the complexity of language and expression. The debate on language ultimately originates in Taoist thinking, especially in Zhuangzi's radical linguistic skepticism. We may recall his famous parable of Pian the wheelwright, who tells Duke Huan that all books are merely dregs of the ancients because, so the wheelwright argues, even the simple craft of wheel-making cannot be put into words and taught to his own son; how can something so complicated as ancient wisdom be transmitted to posterity across the enormous gaps in time and space by means of lifeless signs of a written language? "The world likes to talk about books," says Zhuangzi, "yet books are nothing but words.

Though words have value, what is valuable in words is meaning. There is something to which meaning adheres, but what meaning adheres to cannot be transmitted in language." The art of wheel-making provides a simple instance, for it is something the wheelwright "has got at his fingertips, secured in his heart, but cannot speak out of his mouth" (Z, xiii, pp. 217-18). In such a view, words can never fully convey meaning because "of all things, words can discuss the coarser ones, and the mind can grasp the finer ones. But what words cannot discuss and mind cannot grasp is neither coarse nor fine" (Z, xvii, p. 253).

Zhuangzi is of course talking about the ineffable tao that transcends dimension, language, and comprehension. His words, however, are resonant with overtones obviously crucial and relevant to poetry because poets, more than philosophers, undertake not only to grasp but also to describe in words the coarse, the fine, as well as what transcends the coarseness and fineness of things, to put in beautiful language all that is profound, subtle, probable, or improbable within the wide range of human experience and imagination. If the language of philosophy fails to describe the ineffable tao, it is hardly surprising that the language of poetry would seem especially inadequate for the purpose the poet has set in mind.

Against the background of the debate on language around the 3rd century, we may understand why one of the earliest critical essays in China, Wen fu [Rhymeprose on literature]

by Lu Ji (261-303), would begin with some prefatory remarks on the problem of poetic articulation. In studying the works of gifted writers, says Lu Ji, he often feels that he has grasped something of the workings of their mind. Whenever he himself takes up writing, he can see even more clearly how those writers strived for articulation, for "constantly one feels the anxiety that meaning does not match with things, and writing does not convey meaning. And this results not so much from the difficulty of knowing as from the limitation of one's ability."[38] The hierarchic relationship Lu Ji describes among writing, meaning, and things may remind us of the hierarchy established in that passage in the appendix to the Book of Changes, where it is stated that writing cannot fully convey speech, and speech cannot fully convey meaning. Lu Ji hopes that some day the art of poetry may be fully understood, but he knows very well that it is not at all easy to put one's knowledge into words or practice, for "the knack in accommodating writing to the changing circumstances is indeed difficult to describe in words."[39] In the text of the fu [Rhymeprose] itself, he further develops the idea that not only poets find it difficult to conceive things adequately and put their conception in adequate language, but the critic also

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[38] Preface to Wen fu [Rhymeprose on Literature], in Xiao Tong (501-531) ed., Wen xuan [A Literary Anthology], 3 vols. (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1977), 1:239.

[39] Ibid., 1:240.

finds it difficult to put into words the diverse ways in which one perceives generic or stylistic excellence, the mystery of poetic art:

> Whether be exuberant or concise in style,
> Shape the text in this or that fashion--
> All depends on the needs of the while
> To capture the subtlety of emotion.
> Clumsy expressions may disclose an ingenious idea,
> While plain truths in frivolous words may hide.
> Out of old models a newer piece may be wrought,
> Amidst a muddy stream clearer water may glide.
> A work may be understood at a mere glance,
> Or be comprehended with sustained efforts;
> Like the dancer's sleeves moving with rhythmic beat,
> Or the singer's voice in tune with the chords,
> Art is unsayable, as Pian the wheelwright knows,
> Nor explicable in any eloquent words.[40]

The allusion to Pian the wheelwright is a significant indication of how influential Zhuangzi or the Taoist philosophy in general is in the tradition of Chinese poetics, in spite of the fact that for most part of the history Confucian ethics and politics predominate Chinese thinking in its moral and social aspects. James J. Y. Liu is quite right to claim that the book of Zhuangzi "has influenced Chinese artistic sensibility more profoundly than any other single book."[41] In fact, there are so many references to Pian the wheelwright in traditional Chinese criticism that this particular figure may be said to have become an archetypal image of the tongue-tied poet or critic, who finds his intimate knowledge of poetry

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[40] Ibid., 1:242-3.

[41] Chinese Theories of Literature (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1975), p. 31.

hardly communicable. For example, Liu Xie (c. 465-522) writes in the well-known and most comprehensive work in traditional Chinese criticism, Wenxin diaolong [The Literary Mind or the Carving of Dragon], that poetry has its mystery "as exquisite as the taste in the cauldron Yi Zhi fails to describe or the knack of using the axe Pian the wheelwright cannot put into words."[42] When he first takes up the writing brush, the poet is full of ideas yet to be verbalized, but "when the writing is completed, half of what he had conceived in the beginning disappears. Why is it so? For ideas, soaring high, easily tend towards the wondrous, but words, bound to reality, can rarely attain to equal ingenuity."[43] Writing a thousand years after Liu Xie, another critic Xu Zhenqing (1479-1511) also relates the archetypal wheelwright with the hierarchy of linguistic expressions, maintaining that the various manifestations of poetic excellence are "inexplicable as what Pian the wheelwright has intuitively apprehended. It is said in the Book of Changes, `Writing cannot fully convey the speech, and speech cannot fully convey the meaning.' Then, how can one get the meaning if one seeks it in words?"[44] This radical doubt of the

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[42] Wenxin diaolong zhushi [The Literary Mind or the Carving of Dragon], ed. Zhou Zhenfu (Beijing: Renmin wenxue, 1981), chap. 26, p. 296.

[43] Ibid., p. 295.

[44] Tan yi lu [Discourses on Art], in He Wenhuan (1732-1809), ed. Lidai shihua [Remarks on Poetry from Various Dynasties], 2 vols. (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1981), 2:766.

adequacy of language appears to be one of the deep-seated cultural notions in the Chinese mind. That may explain why traditional Chinese criticism is largely written in the same kind of figurative language as poetry itself. Knowing that they can hardly speak of poetry in a metapoetic language, Chinese critics either quote exemplary lines to demonstrate what they believe to be an exquisite nature or indescribable quality, or try to suggest that nature or quality by means of images and metaphors, i. e., by showing rather than speaking. Instead of analysis and argumentation, Chinese critics tend to write poetry about poetry, and many insightful comments on the art of poetry are found not in criticism as such but in poetry itself. Indeed, many poems can be read as commenting on the problem of poetic language. For example, Qian Zhongshu quotes two lines from a poem by Liu Yuxi (772-842) to underscore an idea that strongly reminds us of Schleiermacher's basic assumption for hermeneutics, that is, misunderstanding occurs as a matter of course, which makes interpretation an absolute necessity:

> However meticulously and scrupulously the creator of texts may ponder over the use of words and the shape of sentences, more often than not the receiver of those texts may still fall short of a thorough understanding, or even lapse into distortion and misunderstanding. `How often I regret that words are too shallow / Ever to reach the depth of human feelings!' Does that lamentation refer only to love? (GZB, 2:406).

Of all our emotional experiences, it is indeed love that often reaches such intensity of feeling that it would leave the poet frustrated in his attempt to speak. In love poems, therefore, the difficulty of poetic articulation becomes a particularly urgent issue. But again, the poet's expression of his frustration is essentially ironic, for not only must he speak about the fact that he cannot speak, but in doing so, he is able to achieve a special eloquence in poetry. This ironic pattern is clearly discernible in many great love poems. Shakespeare, for example, gives a powerful expression to the frustration of speaking in some of his most beautiful sonnets. The poet complains that his language lacks inventiveness:

> Why is my verse so barren of new pride?
> So far from variation or quick change?
> Why with the time do I not glance aside
> To new-found methods and to compounds strange?
> (Sonnet 76)

His muse is "tongue-tied," his thoughts remain unexpressed, "dumb":

> My tongue-tied Muse in manners holds her still,
> While comments of your praise, richly compil'd,
> Reserve their character with golden quill
> And precious phrase by all the Muses fil'd.
> I think good thoughts whilst other write good words,
> And like unlettered clerk still cry "Amen"
> To every hymn that able spirit affords
> In polish'd form of well-refined pen.
> Hearing you prais'd, I say, "'Tis so, 'tis true,"
> And to the most of praise add something more,
> But that is in my thought, whose love to you
> (Though words come hindmost) holds his rank before.
> Then others for the breath of words respect,
> Me for my dumb thoughts, speaking in effect.

(Sonnet 85)

This sonnet has of course complicated levels of meaning, and the poet is not just saying that he is dumb and illiterate, "like unlettered clerk," a statement the very existence of the sonnet implicitly impugns and denies. However, its literal, obvious level of meaning is precisely such a statement, for the effect of the sonnet depends on the subversion of this obvious meaning by the hierarchy of thoughts over words, a hierarchy that rests on the deep level of the poem, reified as a rivalry between our poet of "good thoughts" and other poets of "good words," between his "tongue-tied Muse" and all the other Muses of "precious phrase." In the final couplet, this hierarchy is reinforced to give credit to the "dumb thoughts," while "the breath of words" implies not just the superficiality of articulated words, but their fleeting, ephemeral existence. If our poet finally claims to be a better lover than the others, however, he can do so only at the cost of his capacity as a poet, that is to say, at the cost of poetic language, for the triumph of love rises from the failure of language: that he loves most deeply is indicated only by his inability to express that love in poetry.

The poet's inability or frustration becomes even more intense when the task he faces, properly speaking, is not so much saying as showing, when he wants to describe the beauty of his love rather than to profess his own thoughts and feel-

ings. His Muse appears to be even less competent, and he blames her again for the poverty of his expression and the narrow scope of his vision. But in the very source of failure, he claims to have found his excuse, for the splendor of his love simply surpasses all description:

> O, blame me not if I no more can write!
> Look in your glass, and there appears a face
> That overgoes my blunt invention quite,
> Dulling my lines, and doing me disgrace.
> (Sonnet 103)

Here the hierarchy is not one of thoughts over words, but showing over speaking: the mirror image is privileged for a much closer representation of the original than any verbal description. The final couplet in this sonnet fully recognizes the superiority of images to words, or showing to speaking:

> And more, much more than in my verse can sit,
> Your own glass shows you, when you look in it.

The contest between image and verbal representation, as W. J. T. Mitchell notes, is entrenched in the very history of perception and understanding. It takes roots in many of our age-old notions of reality and representation, in the ways we think about the relations between symbols and the world, signs and their meaning. Very often we too quickly assume a natural connection between pictorial image and the thing it represents, imagining the gulf between words and images to be "as wide as the one between words and things, between (in the

larger sense) culture and nature," thus degrading the value of words:

> The word is its "other," the artificial, arbitrary production of human will that disrupts natural presence by introducing unnatural elements into the world--time, consciousness, history, and the alienating intervention of symbolic mediation.[45]

But according to Mitchell, there is also a countertradition that privileges verbal rather than pictorial imagery. The history of culture, Mitchell maintains, is a competition, a protracted struggle for dominance between pictorial and linguistic signs; and what is most interesting and complex about this struggle is a "relationship of subversion, in which language or imagery looks into its own heart and finds lurking there its opposite number."[46]

In Shakespeare's sonnets, the hierarchy of mirror image over verbal representation is subverted in many subtle ways, in which we certainly find what Mitchell called the countertradition being invoked to justify the higher value of poetic language. In sonnet 76, while the poet ostentatiously admits that his verse lacks inventiveness and variation, the final couplet subverts that literal level of meaning by drawing on the positive associations of the heliotrope to declare that

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[45] W. J. T. Mitchell, Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1986), p. 43.

[46] Ibid.

his verse has the rejuvenating power we usually attribute to the rising sun:

> So all my best is dressing old words new,
> Spending again what is already spent:
> For as the sun is daily new and old,
> So is my love still telling what is told.

The fact that language at the poet's disposal antedates poetry, that it exists a priori as a historical given with ready-made grammatical rules and a well-defined vocabulary, seems to impede the poet's effort to achieve originality, as it only allows him to dress old words new and spend what is already spent. In a recent study of the Shakespearean sonnet cycle, Joel Fineman argues that Shakespeare invents poetic subjectivity by re-writing the conventional poetry of praise; so in sonnet 76 and similar poems that speak precisely about the lack of inventiveness, he can only find "elegiac pathos" and a "tired `love'" compared to "the ancient sun."[47] It is true that the opportunity language offers seems too limited to satisfy the need for ever new expressions, but it seems to me a very simplistic reading of the final couplet if we understand it, as Fineman apparently does, as the poet taking "the ever-renewed sameness of the sun, its perennially revivified vivacity, as a dead metaphor for the animating energeia and enargia of an ideal metaphoricity," or the poet identifying

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[47] Shakespeare's Perjured Eye: The Invention of Poetic Subjectivity in the Sonnets (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), pp. 262, 269.

himself with "the afterlight and aftermath of this dead metaphoric sun," "an aged eternality."[48] The final rhymed couplet in the English sonnet, as Barbara Herrnstein Smith points out, is a powerful device to close the poem with "striking resolution, finality, punch, pointedness, and so forth," and it does this not so much by its formal effectiveness per se as by "its effectiveness in relation to the formal structure that precedes it."[49] With regard to Shakespeare's sonnets in particular, she argues that in most cases "the conclusion of the poem coincides with the resolution of the dialectic process"; in other words, "the dialectical complexity of thought" is represented only insofar as it is represented "as ultimately resolved."[50]

Unless we want to argue that sonnet 76 fails to work out the resolution of its dialectical process, thus also fails to close the poem effectively, we must re-read the final couplet more carefully in relation to the formal structure of the preceding lines. The sonnet begins with a significant "Why" ("Why is my verse so barren of new pride?"), and indeed the octave consists of four successive questions that seriously challenge the poet's ability to write anything original. The tone of the poem, however, shifts a bit in the quatrain that

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[48] Ibid., p. 149.

[49] Poetic Closure: A Study of How Poems End (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1968), p. 51.

[50] Ibid., pp. 141, 142.

immediately follows when the poet tries to come up with an answer:

> O, know, sweet love, I always write of you,
> And you and love are still my argument;
> So all my best is dressing old words new,
> Spending again what is already spent.

The answer may not acquit the poet of all charges of poetic sterility, but the quatrain evidently builds up an antithesis to the compelling interrogation in the octave, setting up the virtue of constancy in love to contrast with the pressure for rhetorical and stylistic "variation or quick change." The questions and the answer nicely illustrate the contour of the dialectic process of the sonnet, and the resolution of that process is summed up in the final couplet in which, as Hallett Smith remarks, "the assertion of constancy in love is related to the consistency of the poet's style."[51]

> For as the sun is daily new and old,
> So is my love still telling what is told.

The last line refers of course both to the poet's love as a constant devotion and to his love poems as repeated praise. The dialectic complexity as shown in the question-and-answer structure in the first twelve lines, or the tension between the demand for rhetorical innovations and the constancy of love, is ultimately resolved in favor of constancy both in love and in writing about love. Thanks to the positive asso-

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[51] The Tension of the Lyre: Poetry in Shakespeare's Sonnets (San Marino: Huntington Library, 1981), p. 86.

ciations of the heliotrope, the complaint voiced against language in the preceding lines suddenly breaks down in the final couplet, overturned by the sun / verse analogy, which bestows on the poet's writing the virtue of endurance, thus closing the sonnet on a positive note of the value of its seemingly barren language.

In Shakespeare's sonnets, then, the final couplet often forms a contrast to the structure of the preceding lines, and when the poet complains about the inadequacy of his language, that complaint is likely to be undercut or overturned by the concluding lines. The same may be said of sonnet 105 in which the poet admits that his verse is "to constancy confin'd." In sonnet 123, he cries out, "No! Time, thou shalt not boast that I do change," and significantly the triumph of constancy over mutability is simultaneously the triumph of poetry as verbal representation over material, visual images that decay in time. Though in sonnet 76, the poet acknowledges that his best is only "dressing old words new," in sonnet 123 he discovers that, after all, everything that exists in time, everything that enters into Time's "registers" and "records," represented by the "pyramids built up with newer might," are nothing but "dressings of a former sight." It is interesting to note that the rejection of time and change is expressed in this sonnet as the negation of visual imagery, the "former sight" or something we see, something whose impressive appearance is only deceptive:

> For thy records and what we see doth lie,
> Made more or less by thy continual haste.

This is a crucial point because it helps set a higher value on verbal signs than visual imagery, thus invoking what Mitchell called the countertradition to exalt the language of poetry in its repetitive constancy. In this poetics of repetition, visual images, rhetorical innovations, and stylistic changes are equated with mutability and even mortality. The obsession with the _memento mori_ in Elizabethan literature puts physical beauty and its mirror image in the context of a feeble existence, forever exposed to the threat of devouring Time, from which only the language of poetry can offer the hope of redemption. This naturally leads us to the appreciation of another familiar theme in the Shakespearean sonnet cycle: the immortalizing power of poetic language. The well-known lines in sonnet 18 can serve as a good example, in which the poet assures his love that however the world may change,

> thy eternal summer shall not fade,
> Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow'st,
> Nor shall Death brag thou wand'rest in his shade,
> When in eternal lines to time thou grow'st.
> So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,
> So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.

In the paradoxical statement--"in eternal lines to time thou grow'st"--timeless eternity and temporal growth are yoked together, and the nature of language is revealed as at once immutable and capable of accommodating to the evolution of time. For in each reading, no matter by whom, where, and when,

poetry, if it is read as poetry, is experienced not as something from the past but in the present, establishing an immediate relationship with the reader. As Gadamer remarks, contemporaneity (Gleichzeitigkeit) "forms part of the being of the work of art. It constitutes the nature of 'being present'" (TM, p. 112). Poetry, and for that matter all works of art, represent "an overcoming of time," and "endow the ephemeral and the transient with a new form of permanence."[52] This applies, of course, to both verbal and pictorial art, and here, as Mitchell argues, poetry and visual art form an interesting "relationship of subversion, in which language or imagery looks into its own heart and finds lurking there its opposite number."[53]

In a poetics that recognizes the creative role of constitutive repetition, language in Shakespeare's sonnets thus proves to be eloquent without being particularly flamboyant, and its value is quietly reassured in the combination of structural and thematic development in the sonnet form. Such a rehabilitation of language is ironically accomplished, for it is the effect of a subverted critique of language, as if the poet finally realizes that his "tongue-tied Muse" has actually achieved the persuasive power of poetic innovation

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[52] Gadamer, The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays, trans. Nicholas Walker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 46, 47.

[53] Iconology, p. 43.

he so desperately sought in following the conventions of the time. In modern poetry, however, it seems much more difficult to assume such a positive attitude towards language. If in Shakespeare we find a "tongue-tied Muse," in Mallarmé we have an impotent one, the "Muse moderne de l'Impuissance."[54] If it is largely a conventional gesture for Shakespeare to complain about the weakness of his language, that complaint seems to sound more real and to disclose a more urgent problem with modern poets. For Mallarmé, the task of the poet is "Donner un sens plus pur aux mots de la tribu" ("Le Tombeau d'Edgar Poe," OC, p. 70), which T. S. Eliot paraphrases as "purify the dialect of the tribe." In fact, as Eliot says repeatedly in Four Quartets, a major concern of the poet is precisely the status of poetic language in modern times:

> our concern was speech, and speech impelled us
> To purify the dialect of the tribe
> And urge the mind to aftersight and foresight.
> (Little Gidding, II, 73-5)[55]

As Shakespeare in the sonnets, the poet in Four Quartets is very much conscious of the problem of Time, and desperately seeking poetic innovations, a new language that would give voice to new vision and new experiences:

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[54] "Symphonie littéraire," in Oeuvres complètes, ed. Henri Mondor and G. Jean-Aubry (Paris: Gallimard, 1945), p. 261; hereafter abbreviated as OC.

[55] All quotations of T. S. Eliot are from The Complete Poems and Plays: 1909-1950 (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1971).

For last year's words belong to last year's language
And next year's words await another voice.
(Little Gidding, II, 65-6)

Throughout Four Quartets, however, the search for a new, precise, and adequate language finally turns out to be a lost battle. In the last section of Burnt Norton, the poet seems to suggest at first that there is still a hope of achieving permanence in the silent form of art:

Words move, music moves
Only in time; but that which is only living
Can only die. Words, after speech, reach
Into the silence. Only by the form, the pattern,
Can words or music reach
The stillness, as a Chinese jar still
Moves perpetually in its stillness.
(Burnt Norton, V, 1-7)

What Eliot talks about here is again the overcoming of time in art. The fleeting sound of words or music, like all that is only living, dies away and is for ever lost as soon as it is heard, but it can transcend time and step out of the cycle of life and death once it has acquired a pattern or form, can grow to time and move, as it were, "perpetually in its stillness." As a symbol of artistic permanence, the "Chinese jar" in Eliot's poem reminds us of the "two Chinamen" carved in stone in W. B. Yeats' Lapis Lazuli, the two figures in "the little half-way house" who, while contemplating "all the tragic scene" amid the world's "mournful melodies," remain nevertheless calm and cheerful in their transcendent state of artistic tranquility:

> Their eyes mid many wrinkles, their eyes,
> Their ancient, glittering eyes, are gay.[56]

Or better still, it reminds us of "the artifice of eternity," the golden bird in Yeats' "holy city of Byzantium" that sings, paradoxically, of "what is past, or passing, or to come."[57] Or, if we trace the imagery of poetic immortality to its romantic forebears, we may find perhaps the most appropriate analogy in Keats' Grecian urn, that graceful "Attic shape," the "silent form" that does "tease us out of thought / As doth eternity."[58] The stillness of artistic form, Eliot continues, is "Not the stillness of the violin, while the note lasts." In other words, the stillness of art form is not caught in the flux of time, but is a permanent "co-existence," the unique contemporaneity of the work of art, or, as Eliot puts it astutely, a stillness in which "all is always now" (Burnt Norton, V, 13).

As a modernist poet, however, Eliot differs from the romantic Keats or even from Yeats in his agonizing awareness of the inadequacy of language in modern times. For him, poetic language can no longer sustain the burden of promised perma-

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[56] Yeats, Collected Poems (New York: Macmillan, 1956), p. 293.

[57] Sailing to Byzantium, ibid., pp. 191, 192.

[58] Ode on a Grecian Urn, 44-45; Complete Poems, ed. Jack Stillinger (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982), p. 283.

nence, but falls apart under the strain of precision, the inevitable discrepancy between the poet's vision and diction:

> Words strain,
> Crack and sometimes break, under the burden,
> Under the tension, slip, slide, perish,
> Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place,
> Will not stay still.
> (Burnt Norton, V, 13-7)

These choppy, ragged lines with monosyllabic verbs bumping along their lengths perfectly mimic the disintegration of language, and apparently there is little hope for the modern poet ever to accomplish his self-appointed mission, the task "to purify the dialect of the tribe." This hopelessness is further intensified in East Coker where Eliot tries to describe his vision of the cosmic flux and reflux, in which the beginning and the end reciprocate, only to find his description at best a feeble shadow of his original conception, just "a way of putting it--not very satisfactory," a trace of his imaginative vision that leaves many desires yet unfulfilled:

> A periphrastic study in a worn-out poetical fashion,
> Leaving one still with the intolerable wrestle
> With words and meanings. The poetry does not matter.
> It was not (to start again) what one had expected.
> (East Coker, II, 19-22)

Here Eliot, as David Spurr comments, "ultimately arrives at an artistically suicidal position that sees the poetic ideal as beyond thought and language, in fact, beyond poetry it-

self."[59] For Barbara H. Smith, the "suspicion of language" as revealed in this passage is symptomatic of the modern age, in which language becomes "the badge of our suspect reason and humanity."[60] The failure of the poet's language to match his imaginative vision is of course his failure as a poet, and a waste of some twenty years he has spent, "Trying to learn to use words," "the years of l'entre deux guerres." The military associations of this phrase dominate Eliot's portrayal of his effort to use words, for "the psychological war between intellectual order and the visionary imagination," as Spurr puts it aptly, "translates into an artistic war between the creative will and linguistic disorder . . . Thus the language and imagery of warfare provide an extended metaphor for the poet's struggle with language."[61] Indeed, the poet's wrestle with words and meanings becomes even more intolerable, as he views it as almost definitely a losing battle:

> And so each venture
> Is a new beginning, a raid on the inarticulate
> With shabby equipment always deteriorating
> In the general mess of imprecision of feeling.
> Undisciplined squads of emotion. And what there is to conquer
> By strength and submission, has already been discovered
> Once or twice, or several times, by men whom one cannot hope
> To emulate--but there is no competition--
> There is only the fight to recover what has been lost

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[59] Conflicts in Consciousness: T. S. Eliot's Poetry and Criticism (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984), p. 80.

[60] Poetic Closure, p. 241.

[61] Conflicts in Consciousness, p. 93.

And found and lost again and again: and now, under conditions
That seem unpropitious.
(East Coker, V, 7-17)

In the frustration at the collapse of language, there is something specifically modern about it, something perhaps we may justly call modernity. The modern poet, Eliot reminds us, cannot hope to emulate his precursors as he has to carry out "a raid on the inarticulate" not only with shabby and always deteriorating equipment, but in an "unpropitious" time which is our own. Spurr argues that a dramatic conflict between an intellectual order and an imaginative order permeates Eliot's consciousness as well as the corpus of his poetry. In fact, by frequently referring to the "dissociated sensibility" in the English tradition since after the Metaphysical poets, Eliot has already situated himself historically in a context that to some extent anticipates and justifies Spurr's argument. "In the seventeenth century," says Eliot, "a dissociation of sensibility set in, from which we have never recovered."[62] For Eliot, then, modernity is not without its own past, and the problem of language in modern poetry is rooted in the dissociation of sensibility which began in the seventeenth century, but the intensity with which the poet senses the language problem and the difficulty of articulation is

[62] "The Metaphysical Poets," in Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot, ed. Frank Kermode (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975), p. 64.

characteristic of the modern times. In a discursive passage of The Dry Salvages, Eliot speaks again of such disunity of his poetic world, the discrepancy between experience and meaning, or between meaning and form:

> We had the experience but missed the meaning,
> And approach to the meaning restores the experience
> In a different form, beyond any meaning
> We can assign to happiness.
> (The Dry Salvages, II, 45-8)

In the last section of Little Gidding, which is also the end of Four Quartets, the poet tries to impose a unity on his disjointed poetic universe by reiterating the cosmic cycle, the merge of the beginning and the end, "where every word is at home," and poetry proclaims both death and birth:

> Every phrase and every sentence is an end and a beginning,
> Every poem an epitaph. And any action
> Is a step to the block, to the fire, down the sea's throat
> Or to an illegible stone: and that is where we start.
> (Little Gidding, V, 11-4)

The language of poetry finally arrives at its origin or point of departure, which is only a hieroglyphic "illegible stone," and can speak only in the elegiac tone of the epitaph. But in the cyclical movement that runs throughout the text, the poem somehow comes to a mystic reconciliation, where the voice is "half-heard, in the stillness / Between two waves of the sea," and somehow everything seems all right:

> And all shall be well and
> All manner of thing shall be well
> When the tongues of flame are in-folded
> Into the crowned knot of fire
> And the fire and the rose are one.

(Little Gidding, V, 42-6)

In emphasizing Eliot's effort to reunite dissociated sensibility, traditional readings tend to ignore his express confessions of the impossibility of appropriate language and communication, while celebrating, even though without much textual confirmation in Eliot's work, an alleged success of that reunion of intellect and emotion, language and experience. Helen Gardner, for instance, offers a wonderful analysis of the musicality of Four Quartets, but dismisses Eliot's explicit comments on his own language as "passages that are in themselves flat, prosaic and inexpressive."[63] She claims that Eliot is unique among English poets in having achieved the balance between his vision and his art:

> When we read Four Quartets we are left finally not with the thought of `the transitory Being who beheld this vision', nor with the thought of the vision itself, but with the poem, beautiful, satisfying, self-contained, self-organized, complete.[64]

If we do not presuppose the textual coherence of Four Quartets as a criterion of its value, however, we must challenge both the unification of sensibility in Eliot's poem and traditional criticism that celebrates such a unification at the cost of sensitivity to the language problem the poem itself persistently raises. We must ask, with Spurr, "whether the text ac-

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[63] The Art of T. S. Eliot (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1950), p. 75.

[64] Ibid., p. 185.

tually brings about this unification or whether, on the other hand, the poet simply invokes this ideal as an impassioned response to the actual experience of textual, psychological, and metaphysical disunity."[65] For traditional critics, any textual fissure and any self-doubt of language are disturbingly alien to the autonomy of poetry, and any "thought" that cannot be comfortably absorbed in a holistic form only threatens to lower the intrinsic value of the poem. Gardner insists that Four Quartets is not a poem of philosophic argument, as though the poem would be worth much less if it is adulterated with the base metal of philosophizing. She compares Eliot favorably with Tennyson as writers of long poems with philosophic ideas, but while "Tennyson can hardly save In Memoriam as a whole from the monotony of life and give it the coherence of art," Eliot "transforms living into art, not thought, gives us a sense of beginning and ending, of the theme having been fully worked out, which is rare in the long poem."[66] And yet, Eliot himself speaks very highly of In Memoriam, finding in its one hundred and thirty-two passages "never monotony or repetition," though he deplores the dissociation of refined language and genuine feeling in Tennyson and Browning as com-

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[65] Conflicts in Consciousness, p. 104.

[66] The Art of T. S. Eliot, p. 47.

pared with Donne or Herbert.[67] But insofar as both In Memoriam and Four Quartets are thematically concerned with the anxiety of language, we may agree with Harold Bloom that, in spite of Eliot's own assertion, the actual forerunners of his poetry are not Jacobean dramatists or Metaphysical lyricists, but "Whitman and Tennyson."[68]

At any rate, Eliot does not seem to shun the temptation of philosophizing in poetry, nor does he regard commenting on language in poetry as prosaic or inexpressive, for he might, as many contemporary critics certainly do, take a great interest in the language problem for its hermeneutic implications not only in discursive writing, but in poetry itself. And in this connection, the following remark Eliot made in 1933 still has its relevancy today:

> The critical mind operating in poetry, the critical effort which goes to the writing of it, may always be in advance of the critical mind operating upon poetry, whether it be one's own or some one else's. . . . And when I speak of modern poetry as being extremely critical, I mean that the contemporary poet, who is not merely a composer of graceful verses, is forced to ask himself such questions as `what is poetry for?'; not merely `what am I to say?' but rather `how and to whom am I to say it?' . . . If poetry is a form of `communication', yet that which is to be communicated is the poem itself,

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[67] Eliot, "In Memoriam," in Selected Prose, p. 243. For his comparison of Tennyson with Herbert, see "The Metaphysical Poets," ibid., pp. 64-5.

[68] Modern Critical Views: T. S. Eliot, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea, 1985), p. 2. For a reading of In Memoriam as expressing a deep-seated anxiety of language, see William A. Wilson, "Victorian Philology and the Anxiety of Language in Tennyson's In Memoriam," TSLL 30 (Spring 1988): 28-48.

> and only incidentally the experience and the thought which have gone into it.[69]

Here, Eliot shows how highly self-conscious modern poetry is of its own linguistic nature, its mode of existence as a verbal artifact, and its paradox as both means and the content of communication. The self-critique of poetic language in Four Quartets, therefore, does not just attach to the more lyrical and imagistic part as a sort of discursive accessory, but constitutes as integral a part of the poem and sets up the dialectic structure of language's movement which, indeed, thematically as well as semantically, is at the heart of the poem.

Spurr maintains that Eliot's great poem ends with "the final obituary on language"; that it "proclaims the death of language, and stands as a commitment to his search for unity of the self in `the constitution of silence.'"[70] The near despair in the line that "poetry does not matter" strikes him as "an artistically suicidal position."[71] However, the seemingly indifferent tone in this abandonment of the search for poetic expressiveness may ironically conceal in its depth the conviction that poetry is all that matters, even though its imperfect medium, the corrupted words and meanings, may at best suggest what is to be desired in poetry. As Barbara H. Smith

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[69] "The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism," in Selected Prose, pp. 79-80.

[70] Conflicts in Consciousness, pp. 103, 106.

[71] Ibid., p. 80.

argues, Eliot's poem not only expresses the problem of language, but also embodies the paradox it entails: "Language is what fails us and fails between us; but language is also the material of poetry."[72] This is of course the paradox of language not only poets, but also philosophers and mystics have to reconcile in one way or another. By claiming that "poetry does not matter," Eliot probably meant to solve the problem by something like the mystic strategy of provisional names or Zhuangzi's "non-words," something that tries to make words both present as meaningful signifiers and infinitely receding as empty traces of an absent signified, both that which literally matters as poetic icons and that which literally does not matter as mere signs. After all, language is the being of poetry, and the poet, however frustrated and disappointed he may be with words, has to use words for what it is worth. In the end, the poet realizes that language as such is all we have, and he declares, rather like Tennyson's Ulysses, that "We shall not cease from exploration" (Little Gidding, V, 26). He has always to try, and hope that someday, somehow, he may find a way to make his effort successful. As Eliot himself says,

> But perhaps neither gain nor loss.
> For us, there is only the trying. The rest is not
> our business.
> (East Coker, V, 17-8)

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[72] Poetic Closure, pp. 241-2.

CHAPTER III. THE USE OF SILENCE

Elected Silence, sing to me
And beat upon my whorlèd ear,
Pipe me to pastures still and be
The music that I care to hear.

Gerard Manley Hopkins,
The Habit of Perfection

Schweigen. Wer inniger schwieg,
rührt an die Wurzeln der Rede.

Be silent. Who keeps silent inside
touches the roots of speech.

Rainer Maria Rilke,
Für Frau Fanette Clavel

1. RILKE: POETRY AS PRAISE

Commenting on T. S. Eliot's problematic enunciation in Four Quartets that "The poetry does not matter," Stephen Spender aptly points out that such a statement can only be ironic, for the dismissal of poetry is "itself an artistic device."[1] In comparing Four Quartets with another important work in twentieth-century literature, Rainer Maria Rilke's Duino Elegies, however, Spender does see in both works a tendency of going beyond the symbolism of poetry, that "the poetry itself is, one might say, not the only goal of the poems: or, perhaps one should say there is a goal beyond the one of pure

[1] "Rilke and Eliot," in Rilke: The Alchemy of Alienation, ed. F. Baron, E. S. Dick, and W. R. Maurer (Lawrence: The Regents Press of Kansas, 1980), p. 52.

poetry--religious vision."[2] Although Rilke's vision may differ from that of Eliot, at the time of writing these works, so Spender argues, both authors have come to believe in certain ideas that are more important to them than poetry itself and to which their poetry constantly refers. In such works, therefore, "the symbol is no longer an end in itself, the poetry is no longer self-sufficient; it is a point of departure to the expression of supernatural values."[3] For Spender, then, the difficulty of poetic articulation, so self-consciously revealed in both Four Quartets and the Duino Elegies, has to do with the goal of these poems, which seems to transcend pure poetry and lead to the expression of supernatural values, or rather, to the expression of the divine Word which is ultimately inexpressible. One may of course disagree with Spender on the exact nature of the poets' vision, but one thing is certain, namely, that there is a conflict between the poets' desire to give their vision an appropriate form and their awareness that language is inadequate for carrying out such a mission.

We have seen how the poet's awareness of the limitation of language persistently raises self-doubt in Eliot's Four Quartets. Similarly, Rilke gives a tone of uncertainty to his Duino Elegies by beginning the whole group of poems with a

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[2] Ibid., p. 47.

[3] Ibid., p. 52.

question: "Wer, wenn ich schriee, hörte mich denn aus der Engel / Ordnungen?" ("Who, if I cried out, would hear me among the angels' / hierarchies?")[4] As readers inevitably overhear this question, they are made to understand that when the poet speaks, his voice should presumably be heard by the angels, but now this intimate relationship between the poet and his celestial listeners is no longer attainable. The poet's alienation from the angels reminds us of Schiller's lament over the deplorable loss of the "naive," mythological past, but the implications of Rilke's question can be fully appreciated not only in general terms as a post-Schillerian sensibility in modern poetry, but in particular terms of Rilke's very personal vision, the peculiar cosmology of his imaginative world, in which angels form a higher order of beings against whom the abilities of men are to be tested. The angel of the Elegies, according to Rilke, is "that creature in whom the transformation of the visible into the invisible, which we are accomplishing, already appears in its completion . . .; that being who guarantees the recognition of a higher level of reality in the invisible"; the angel is "terrifying" (schrecklich) because we, "its lovers and transformers, still cling to the

[4] The First Elegy, 1-2. Except for the poems I quote and translate directly from Sämtliche Werke, for all the German texts and English translations of Rilke, I use the bilingual edition of The Selected Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke, ed. and trans. Stephen Mitchell (New York: Vintage, 1982).

visible."[5] Here, a contrast between angel and man is clearly set up, wherein the limitations of man vis-à-vis the angel are due to human difficulties in transformation, since man does not have the adequate means to transcend the visible, the outward appearance of the phenomenal world, and to express the inwardness in a voice that can reach the angels' hierarchies. For Rilke, transformation of the visible into the invisible is very important; it is the proper task of the poet nature itself urges him to fulfill. He writes:

> _Erde, ist es nicht dies, was du willst:_ unsichtbar
> _in uns erstehn?--Ist es dein Traum nicht,_
> _einmal unsichtbar zu sein?--Erde! unsichtbar!_
> _Was, wenn Verwandlung nicht, ist dein drängender_
> _Auftrag?_

> Earth, isn't this what you want: to arise within us,
> _invisible_? Isn't it your dream
> to be wholly invisible someday?--O Earth: invisible!
> What, if not transformation, is your urgent command?
> (IX, 67-70)

Some critics argue that to transform the earth into the invisible, to let it "arise within us," can be understood as essentially a Hegelian _Aufhebung_ of the phenomenal world into the inward vision of poetic subjectivity, the moving away of the spirit in the romantic period from the unification of the Idea and its sensuous appearance, which for Hegel is the ideal

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[5] "To Witold Hulewicz, November 13, 1925," in _Briefe aus Muzot_ (Leipzig: Insel, 1935), 337; quoted in Mitchell's notes, p. 317.

form of beauty, once perfectly achieved in classical art.[6] Though Rilke is heir to the symbolist tradition, says Richard Jayne, his vision of transformation has its historical antecedent in German romanticism, in which we already find "a latent awareness of the precariousness of the union of inner and outer reality in the inwardness of poetry."[7] In such a Hegelian reading, the poet's alienation from the angels is seen as dialectically inevitable when the spirit moves beyond its realization in sensuous appearance, but from the very start, this alienation is also presented in the Duino Elegies as a problem of language. Rilke says that we can no longer reach the angels because we depend so much on the performance of a dubiously equivocal language, that "we are not really at home in / our interpreted world" ("wir nicht sehr verläßlich zu Haus sind / in der gedeuteten Welt" I, 12-3). We cannot fulfil the task of transformation because we still cling to the visible:

> Sichtbar
> wollen wirs heben, wo doch das sichtbarste Glück uns
> erst zu erkennen sich giebt, wenn wir es innen
> verwandeln.

> We want to display it,
> to make it visible, though even the most visible
> happiness
> can't reveal itself to us until we transform it, within.
> (VII, 47-49)

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[6] See Richard Jayne, "Rilke and the Problem of Poetic Inwardness," in Rilke: The Alchemy of Alienation, pp. 191-222.

[7] Ibid., p. 194.

But if the most visible happiness can only be revealed to us in its transformation, wherein the visible world shrinks and even completely vanishes, how can the poet still avail himself of external images and symbols to convey his inward vision? This is indeed a difficulty at the center of the poems Rilke tries to write, because language the poet must use, all the words, images, and metaphors that constitute his language, are deeply rooted in the concrete, visible world, and human beings must depend on the visible to symbolize the invisible. Rilke puts it clearly that we still want visibly to display what is invisible. In this sense, the difficulty of transformation is also the difficulty of poetic articulation, for the poet, like the philosopher and the mystic, still has to use language to express what is beyond language and to say what is unsayable.

Although most of the Duino Elegies do not address the problem of human deficiencies and limitations explicitly in terms of language, the lament resounding through the work can certainly be understood as due to the poet's regret that language has lost its power to unify the inner and outer worlds by means of images and metaphors, by the symbolism of poetry, and Rilke can be seen as a self-critical symbolist, one who is conscious of the inadequacy of verbal images and symbols. Indeed, the inadequacy of language is part of man's limitation in transforming the visible into the invisible, and the split of spirit and outside world is always related to our inability to grasp and express the inward vision, the Weltinnenraum. In

Rilke's mythological world, only angels, those superhuman beings and "Creation's pampered favorites" ("Verwöhnten der Schöpfung" II, 10), can dispense with language in their silent grasp of unmediated inwardness, while human beings, caught in the brevity of a transient life, are not only bereft of angelic eternity but also lack the ability to find adequate images and symbols for their inward experience. The poet is made particularly aware of this inadequacy when he looks at some ancient Attic gravestones and contemplates the perfect figures carved on them. The difference is strongly felt:

> Denn das eigene Herz übersteigt uns
> noch immer wie jene. Und wir können ihm nicht mehr
> nachschaun in Bilder, die es besänftigen, noch in
> göttliche Körper, in denen es größer sich mäßigt.
>
> For our own heart always exceeds us
> as theirs did. And we can no longer follow it, gazing
> into images that soothe it or into the godlike bodies
> where, measured more greatly, it achieves a greater
> repose.
> (II, 76-9)

The images in classical art, those "godlike bodies" we find in Greek sculptures, can no longer be created in modern poetry; the modern poet can no longer objectify the world of inwardness by taking images from the outside world. Thus the second Elegy, as E. L. Stahl argues, instances two reasons for lament: first, the "transient and evanescent" nature of man, and second, "the absence of valid external symbols for the inward actions of his soul," for the poet is now "unable

to create new objects of an intimately human value."[8] In fact, the poet's lament for the loss of symbolic correspondence, his inability to express inward actions by means of images and metaphors, is not just a motif in the second Elegy, but a major theme developed throughout the Duino Elegies.

The fourth Elegy laments the distractedness of our mind and its transiency and oscillation: "Uns aber, wo wir Eines meinen, ganz, / ist schon des andern Aufwand fühlbar" ("But we, while we are intent upon one object, / already feel the pull of another" IV, 9-10). Because of such perpetual hesitation and split mind, we are unable to know the inner self without first depending on some kind of external signs: "Wir kennen den Kontur / des Fühlens nicht: nur, was ihn formt von außen" ("we never know / the actual, vital contour of our own / emotions--just what forms them from outside" IV, 17-8). The distractedness and dichotomy of our mind, says Rilke, make us inferior even to the inanimate puppet, whose simplicity somehow draws it closer to the angel: "Engel und Puppe: dann ist endlich Schauspiel" ("Angel and puppet: a real play, finally" IV, 57). In the eighth Elegy, the openness (das Offene) or freedom of the animals is brought into comparison with man's tragically narrow and schismatic vision, since for us "Dieses heißt Schicksal: gegenüber sein / und nichts als das und immer

[8] "The Duineser Elegien," in Rainer Maria Rilke: Aspects of his Mind and Poetry, ed. William Rose and G. Craig Houston (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1938), pp. 140-1.

gegenüber" ("That is what fate means: to be opposite, / to be opposite and nothing else, forever" VIII, 33-4).

The doomed dichotomy of subject and object in the human mind can hardly be more emphatically put than in these words. The difference here, Rilke explains, is that "the animal is in the world; we stand in front of the world because of the peculiar turn and heightening which our consciousness has taken."[9] The dichotomy is not just between man and the world, but the split within the human mind itself. For Rilke, our consciousness and language are so structured that such split becomes our fate, totally unavoidable. In his earlier poems, he had tried to find ways of transcending this dichotomy, at least temporarily, by reversing the position of subject and object, by assuming a kind of inner sight of the blind, the vision or sensibility of a panther, a gazelle, a swan, or a cat. This is the central theme of the poem Archaïscher Torso Apollos, in which the viewer and the viewed change places, and transformation of our ordinary life becomes art's compelling command:

> Wir kannten nicht sein unerhörtes Haupt
> darin die Augenäpfel reiften. Aber
> sein Torso glüht noch wie ein Kandelaber,
> in dem sein Schauen, nur zurückgeschraubt,
>
> sich hält und glänzt. Sonst könnte nicht der Bug
> der Brust dich blenden, und im leisen Drehen

---

[9] "To Lev P. Struve, February 25, 1926," in Maurice Betz, Rilke in Frankreich: Erinnerungen--Briefe--Dokumente (Wien: Herbert Reichner Verlag, 1937), quoted in Mitchell's notes, p. 329.

der Lenden könnte nicht ein Lächeln gehen
zu jener Mitte, die die Zeugung trug.

Sonst stünde dieser Stein entstellt und kurz
unter der Schultern durchsichtigem Sturz
und flimmerte nicht so wie Raubtierfelle;

und bräche nicht aus allen seinen Rändern
aus wie ein Stern: denn da ist keine Stelle,
die dich nicht sieht. Du mußt dein Leben ändern.

We cannot know his legendary head
with eyes like ripening fruit. And yet his torso
is still suffused with brilliance from inside,
like a lamp, in which his gaze, now turned to low,

gleams in all its power. Otherwise
the curved breast could not dazzle you so, nor could
a smile run through the placid hips and thighs
to that dark center where procreation flared.

Otherwise this stone would seem defaced
beneath the translucent cascade of the shoulders
and would not glisten like a wild beast's fur:

would not, from all the borders of itself,
burst like a star: for here there is no place
that does not see you. You must change your life.

The poem begins with a typically Rilkean negative statement that presents before our eyes what is absent: the statue is without head and eyes, but paradoxically radiant with an inward light. In fact, the negative mood predominates throughout the text, even the final reversion of the viewer and the viewed is put in a strange, negative way of saying it: "here there is no place / that does not see you." Looking at the statue, the viewer suddenly becomes the viewed, and it is the eyeless torso of Apollo that sees and reveals the necessity of transformation. But eyes like apples ("die Augenäpfel") literally exist from the very start, only negatively, and by

mentioning what is absent, the poet in fact makes that absent object present by means of language. The final imperative, put in a categorically affirmative mood, thus sounds especially emphatic and moving.

It is of course difficult to change our lives, and in the Duino Elegies, our fated dichotomy still makes for the poet's lament. In the fifth Elegy, which is inspired by Picasso's painting Les Saltimbanques, in describing the jaded acrobats and their hardly-interested onlookers, Rilke suddenly speaks of a smile on the face of the little boy, who still feels the pain, "the stinging in the soles" (das Brennen der Fußsohln" V, 53), and he turns to the angel, calling on him to seize that momentary, fleeting smile and immortalize it in a vase or urn:

> Engel! o nimms, pflücks, das kleinblütige Heilkraut.
> Schaff eine Vase, verwahrs! Stells unter jene, uns noch nicht
> offenen Freuden; in lieblicher Urne
> rühms mit blumiger schwungiger Aufschrift:
> >Subrisio Saltat.<.
>
> Oh gather it, Angel, that small-flowered herb of healing.
> Create a vase and preserve it. Set it among those joys
> not yet open to us; on that lovely urn
> praise it with the ornately flowing inscription:
> "Subrisio Saltat."
> (V, 58-61)

Considering that the poem is based on a painting created by man that has already permanently gathered and preserved the boy's smile in color and form, the apostrophe to the angel seems doubly ironic and puzzling. But for Rilke, the acrobats

are images of ourselves, they are tired and bored, doing their routine gymnastic feats like automatons with no real interest, with no smile. So are their audiences, who come and go, "their thin / surfaces glossy with boredom's specious half-smile" ("glänzend mit dünnster / Oberfläche leicht scheinlächelnden Unlust" V, 24-5). Rilke later describes lovers in their love-making as a "genuinely smiling pair" ("wahrhaft lächelnde Paar" V, 106). Evidently, smile, the simple sign of joy and human affection repeatedly mentioned in the poem, takes on a special meaning, signifying the state of the inner world, and a moment that breaks the routine mechanism of daily existence. That explains why the poet wants to preserve and inscribe the boy's smile as "Subrisio Saltatorum" ("the Acrobats' Smile"), and to know the place where young acrobats are still novices, whose tricks not yet totally automatic:

> wo die Gewichte noch schwer sind;
> wo noch von ihren vergeblich
> wirbelnden Stäben die Teller
> torkeln . . . . .
>
> where the weights are still heavy; where
> from their vainly twirling sticks
> the plates still wobble
> and drop . . . . .
>
> (V, 77-80)

The poet feels, however, that he can neither know the place nor immortalize the smile. The place where the novices become jaded performers is for him an "unsayable spot" ("die unsägliche Stelle" V, 82); and only angel knows on what "unsayable carpet" ("auf unsäglichem Teppich" V, 96) lovers em-

brace and lean on each other. Here, the word "unsayable" is of great importance, because it discloses the loss of the power of representation in modern poetry, the collapse of poetic language. As Eliot puts it sharply in Four Quartets:

> Words strain,
> Crack and sometimes break, under the burden,
> Under the tension, slip, slide, perish,
> Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place,
> Will not stay still.
> (Burnt Norton, V, 13-7)

In the Duino Elegies, however, after all the anxiety and lament, Rilke finally manages to give a more positive response than Eliot does to the textual, psychological, and metaphysical disunity that seems to pervade modern poetry. When Rilke calls on the angel to immortalize the little boy's smile, the word "rühms" ("praise it" V, 61) offers the key to his solution to the language problem. If by praise the angel is able to preserve the boy's smile, so will the poet:

> Oh sage, Dichter, was du tust?
> --Ich rühme.
> Aber das Tödliche und Ungetüme,
> wie hältst du's aus, wie nimmst du's hin?
> --Ich rühme.
> Aber das Namenlose, Anonyme,
> wie rufst du's, Dichter, dennoch an?
> --Ich rühme.
> Woher dein Recht, in jeglichem Kostüme,
> in jeder Maske wahr zu sein?
> --Ich rühme.
> Und daß das Stille und das Ungestüme
> wie Stern und Sturm dich kennen?
> :--weil ich rühme.

> [Oh, speak, poet, what do you do?
> --I praise.
> But the deadly and the monstrous,
> how do you bear them, how do you take them?

--I praise.
But the nameless, the anonymous,
how do you, poet, still invoke them?
--I praise.
Whence your right, in each costume,
in every mask, to be true?
--I praise.
How do the quiet and the vehement
like star and storm all know you?
:--for I praise.][10]

For Rilke, praise has a very special meaning, it is a sort of verbal magic that helps invoke the nameless and the unnameable, and fulfil the task of transformation. It is a magic of incantation in which words take on the great power to summon the invisible:

> Hier ist Magie. In das Bereich des Zaubers
> scheint das gemeine Wort hinaufgestuft . . .
> und ist doch wirklich wie der Ruf des Taubers,
> der nach der unsichtbaren Taube ruft.
>
> [Here is magic. In the realm of enchantment
> the ordinary word appears lifted up . . .
> and yet is real as the cock pigeon's cry,
> that calls for the invisible dove.][11]

Once the poet learns how to praise, he has the magic of words at his command to overcome the difficulty of articulation. The seventh Elegy already clearly signals the transition from lament to praise when the poet no longer looks to the angelic, but rather affirms what belongs to the human, declaring that "Hiersein ist herrlich" ("Truly being here is glorious!" VII,

[10] Rilke, "Für Leonie Zacharias," in Sämtliche Werke, ed. Ernst Zinn (Wiesbaden: Insel, 1955-66), 2:249.

[11] Rilke, "Magie," ibid., 2:174-5.

39). The contrast between angel and poet, which is constantly emphasized throughout the Duino Elegies, now reaches a turning point where the human voice becomes more courageous, more confident, and even defiant:

> Glaub nicht, daß ich werbe.
> Engel, und würb ich dich auch! Du kommst nicht.
> Denn mein
> Anruf ist immer voll Hinweg; wider so starke
> Strömung kannst du nicht schreiten.

> Don't think that I'm wooing.
> Angel, and even if I were, you would not come. For my call
> is always filled with departure; against such a powerful
> current you cannot move.
> (VII, 85-8)

In the last two Elegies, the tone definitely changes where we clearly hear the voice of praise, the triumphant jubilee of the here and now, celebrating the human situation despite all its deficiencies and limitations. The poet no longer woos the angel but sees man's brief life-span as almost standing against the angelic eternity. Though we exist but once and never again, Rilke argues, but to have been this once, "to have been at one with the earth, seems beyond undoing" ("irdisch gewesen zu sein, scheint nicht widerrufbar" IX, 16). And significantly, in the ninth Elegy, both the limitations of man and the way to overcome them are put in terms of what can and cannot be said, the sayable and the unsayable. The hardships in life and the joy of love are both unsayable, but language is the only means to register all our feelings, actions, and experiences. The traveler coming back from the

mountain slope does not bring a handful of unsayable earth but a pure word like a wild flower. Isn't this precisely what man can and should do?

> Sind wir vielleicht hier, um zu sagen: Haus, Brücke, Brunnen, Tor, Krug, Obstbaum, Fenster,-- höchstens: Säule, Turm.... aber zu sagen, verstehs, oh zu sagen so, wie selber die Dinge niemals innig meinten zu sein.

> Perhaps we are here in order to say: house, bridge, fountain, gate, pitcher, fruit-tree, window-- at most: column, tower.... But to say them, you must understand,
> oh to say them more intensely than the Things themselves
> ever dreamed of existing.
>
> (IX, 31-5)

This is a truly powerful plea for human language and its role of representation, for saying is here conceived as more intensely ontological than the things themselves could have ever dreamed to be, and it is saying that defines in both temporal and spatial terms what is uniquely human. Rilke proclaims:

> Hier ist des Säglichen Zeit, hier seine Heimat. Sprich und bekenn.

> Here is the time for the sayable, here is its homeland. Speak and bear witness.
>
> (IX, 42-3)

The word "das Sägliche," as H. E. Holthusen comments, "becomes the mythical key-word to describe man's position vis-à-vis the Angel, while `das Unsägliche' comes to stand as the Angel's attribute, a kind of pseudonym of transcendence."[12] In

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[12] Rainer Maria Rilke: A Study of his Later Poetry, trans. J. P. Stern (Cambridge: Bowes & Bowes, 1952), p. 32.

contradistinction to the angel's mystical unsayable, the poet is here to say, to speak, to praise, and his saying affirms the value of simple, concrete words and things:

> Preise dem Engel die Welt, nicht die unsägliche, ihm
> kannst du nicht großtun mit herrlich Erfühltem; im Weltall,
> wo er fühlender fühlt, bist du ein Neuling. Drum zeig
> ihm das Einfache, das, von Geschlecht zu Geschlechtern gestaltet,
> als ein Unsriges lebt, neben der Hand und im Blick.
> Sag ihm die Dinge.
>
> Praise this world to the angel, not the unsayable one,
> you can't impress him with glorious emotion; in the universe
> where he feels more powerfully, you are a novice. So show him
> something simple which, formed over generations,
> lives as our own, near our hand and within our gaze.
> Tell him of Things.
>
> (IX, 52-7)

In this joyful celebration of the sayable and things, Rilke sees the poet's task as praising the world to the angel. But if saying and praise is what he can and must do, then earth's command of transformation, its desire to "arise within us" and be "invisible," cannot be a negation of language: it can only be earth's arising in language by the incantation of poetry. Therefore, the dismissal of language in poetry can only be self-ironic, and the poet who negates language must reclaim it, following the same ironic pattern as we have described in earlier chapters with regard to philosophy and mysticism. On the other hand, the language in which earth arises invisibly is an internalized language, a language that does not refer to the outward appearance as the ultimate signified or ulti-

mate justification, but a suggestive language that constantly points beyond the visible object to the invisible and the unsayable, all the while creating a world of its own. In the German original, "Sag ihm die Dinge," the direct relation of saying and things is much more emphatic than can be conveyed in the English translation: a transitive relation that implies the power of language to create, to make things happen.

This is borne out clearly in Rilke's Sonnets to Orpheus. At the beginning of the tenth Elegy, the poet wishes,

> Daß ich dereinst, an dem Ausgang der grimmigen Einsicht,
> Jubel und Ruhm aufsinge zustimmenden Engeln.

> Someday, emerging at last from the violent insight,
> let me sing out jubilation and praise to assenting angels!
> (X, 1-2)

That wish is amply fulfilled in the Sonnets, of which the cheerful tone of praise and celebration forms a striking contrast to the lament of the Duino Elegies. The myth of Orpheus the divine singer--his power to tame wild animals with music, his descent into Hades, and his being torn to pieces by the Maenads--provide Rilke with an excellent fabula for putting together the various aspects of his vision of the poet as the singer of praise. If now is the time for the sayable, and the earth its homeland, then Orpheus is the archetypal poet, the self-image of the poet as one who praises:

> Rühmen, das ists! Ein zum Rühmen Bestellter,
> ging er hervor wie das Erz aus des Steins
> Schweigen. Sein Herz, o vergängliche Kelter
> eines den Menschen unendlichen Weins.

Nie versagt ihm die Stimme am Staube,
wenn ihn das göttliche Beispiel ergreift.
Alles wird Weinberg, alles wird Traube,
in seinem fühlenden Süden gereift.

Nicht in den Grüften der Könige Moder
straft ihm die Rühmung lügen, oder
daß von den Göttern ein Schatten fällt.

Er ist einer der bleibenden Boten,
der noch weit in die Türen der Toten
Schalen mit rühmlichen Früchten hält.

Praising is what matters! He was summoned for that,
and came to us like the ore from a stone's
silence. His mortal heart presses out
a deathless, inexhaustible wine.

Whenever he feels the god's paradigm grip
his throat, the voice does not die in his mouth.
All becomes vineyard, all becomes grape,
ripened on the hills of his sensuous South.

Neither decay in the sepulchre of kings
nor any shadow that has fallen from the gods
can ever detract from his glorious praising.

For he is a herald who is with us always,
holding far into the doors of the dead
a bowl with ripe fruit worthy of praise.
(I, 7)

The poet, symbolized by Orpheus, is summoned to praise and make music out of stony silence, but the self-portrait is neither the fantasy of poetic subjectivity nor apotheosis of the poet as an individual, for in Rilke's heightened sensibility and expanded capacity for expression, things no longer stand outside the subject but become "so enveloped in a universal, self-oblivious feeling," as Holthusen says, "that now, of a sudden, the object itself begins to speak, begins in its

turn to manifest and express feeling."[13] But the object is now not an object as such, but an object internalized, "like the ore from a stone's / silence." Thus Rilke says in the first Orphic sonnet:

> _Da stieg ein Baum. O reine Übersteigung!_
> _O Orpheus singt! O hoher Baum im Ohr!_
> _Und alles schwieg. Doch selbst in der Verschweigung_
> _ging neuer Anfang, Wink und Wandlung vor._
>
> A tree ascended there. Oh, pure transcendence!
> Oh Orpheus sings! Oh tall tree in the ear!
> And all things hushed. Yet even in that silence
> a new beginning, beckoning, changes appeared.
> (I, 1)

The tree that arises in the ear is not a physical tree, not a tree lying outside the sphere of language, but one that is internalized and brought into being by poetic articulation. The silence of things promises new beginnings and changes, beckoning the poet to speak, to bring the unsayable into the circle of communication. Ultimately it is by naming the finite and the nameable that he can speak of the infinite and the unnameable, yet every name is now invested with the power of symbolic representation, every word endowed with the magic of invocation, and poetry comes out of silence:

> _Ein Gott vermags. Wie aber, sag mir, soll_
> _ein Mann ihm folgen durch die schmale Leier?_
> _Sein Sinn ist Zwiespalt. An der Kreuzung zweier_
> _Herzwege steht kein Tempel für Apoll._
>
> _Gesang, wie du ihn lehrst, ist nicht Begehr,_
> _nicht Werbung um ein endlich noch Erreichtes;_
> _Gesang ist Dasein. Für den Gott ein Leichtes._

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[13] _Rilke: A Study of his Later Poetry_, p. 11.

Wann aber sind wir? Und wann wendet er

an unser Sein die Erde und die Sterne?
Dies ists nicht, Jüngling, daß du liebst, wenn
auch
die Stimme dann den Mund dir aufstößt,--lerne

vergessen, daß du aufsangst. Das verrinnt.
In Wahrheit singen, ist ein andrer Hauch.
Ein Hauch um nichts. Ein Wehn im Gott. Ein
Wind.

A god can do it. But will you tell me how
a man can penetrate through the lyre's strings?
Our mind is split. And at the shadowed crossing
of heart-roads, there is no temple for Apollo.

Song, as you have taught it, is not desire,
not wooing any grace that can be achieved;
song is reality. Simple, for a god.
But when can we be real? When does he pour

the earth, the stars, into us? Young man,
it is not your loving, even if your mouth
was forced wide open by your own voice--learn

to forget that passionate music. It will end.
True singing is a different breath, about
nothing. A gust inside the god. A wind.
(I, 3)

This sonnet admirably recapitulates what we have discussed above: the difficulty of saying, the split of the mind, and poetry as originating from inner silence and nothingness. Rilke is restating the poetics of impersonality he has put forward in Malte Laurids Brigge that "poems are not, as people think, simply emotions (one has emotions early enough)--they are experiences."[14] One must forget the personal "passionate music" that naturally bursts out of the mouth, and learn to

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[14] Mitchell's translation, p. 91.

sing in "a different breath, about / nothing. A gust inside the god. A wind." What is decisive in all the arts, as Rilke says himself, "is not their outward appearance, not what is called the `beautiful'; but rather their deepest, most inner origin, the buried reality that calls forth this appearance."[15] Only when the poet has reached the inner origin, the silence and nothingness that call forth the beautiful appearance, can he invoke the inexpressible and give it reality.

In the light of the Orphic sonnets, we may understand what exactly Rilke means by praise. If the act of praise helps the poet call upon the nameless and the anonymous, we may wonder whether its magic is not essentially of the same kind of mystic strategy to reclaim language as we have seen in both the West and the East, something not unlike Zhuangzi's "non-words," the Nagarjunian "provisional names," or Meister Eckhart's command to preach the "silent word." Indeed, silence is of paramount importance in Rilke's poetics. As he says,

> Schweigen. Wer inniger schwieg,
> rührt an die Wurzeln der Rede.
> Einmal wird ihm dann jede
> erwachsene Silbe zum Sieg.

> [Be silent. Who keeps silent inside
> touches the roots of speech.
> Then each growing syllable
> becomes for him a victory.][16]

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[15] "To Princess Marie von Thurn und Taxis-Hohenlohe, November 17, 1912; quoted in Mitchell's notes, p. 337.

[16] Rilke, "Für Frau Fanette Clavel," in Sämtliche Werke, 2:258.

In order to sing, one must learn to be silent, for true singing, as Rilke insists, is "about / nothing. A gust inside the god. A wind." Paradoxically silence, which seems to negate language, contains the roots of speech, and Rilke's redemptive myth is that of Orpheus, the divine singer who is born with a magic voice, making music out of silence. In the famous line "Gesang ist Dasein," language and the reality of things are reaffirmed, for the name and the thing named become identical in the poetic articulation, and poetry forms the basis for validating human existence from within, i. e., from internalized experiences. Thus to praise a thing is to name it, and by naming to bestow on it an ontological value. By defining poetry as praise in this special sense, Rilke reclaims the power of language to convey the truth of inwardness, making it a poetic equivalent of the philosophic and mystic logos, the unification of being and saying. Moreover, Rilke's Gesang is not just a provisional name of being, but is being itself, albeit an ontologically limited being-there, an existential Dasein.

2. MALLARMÉ'S UNWRITTEN BOOK

The idea of indirect suggestion, of using the visible to evoke the invisible, is certainly of great importance in the legacy of symbolist poetry and poetics. Writing on Eugène Delacroix, Charles Baudelaire comments on how this great artist success-

fully made visible what is "the invisible, the impalpable, the dream, the nerves, the soul."[17] He is particularly fond of Delacroix's remark that nature is "a vast dictionary."[18] The lexical metaphor seems to indicate that for Baudelaire, as for Delacroix, nature is a dictionary of nonverbal signs and symbols which help the poet and the artist read the invisible inner world and make sense of it when they organize those signs and symbols into intelligible texts. Nature as a dictionary contains clues to the understanding of the invisible world as an ultimate text, whose meaning it is the task of the poet and the artist to decipher and interpret by reconstructing it with verbal or visual images. Delacroix has done it successfully in color and contour, the poet must achieve it with words. In the famous sonnet Correspondances, Baudelaire portrays nature as "un temple où de vivants piliers / Laissent parfois sortir de confuses paroles" ("a temple of living pillars / where often words emerge, confused and dim"); it is a terrain of "forests of symbols" ("forêts de symboles") where all sensory perceptions are fused together: "Les parfums, les couleurs et les sons se répondent" ("perfumes, sounds, and

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[17] "The Life and Work of Eugène Delacroix," The Mirror of Art: Critical Studies by Charles Baudelaire, trans. and ed. Jonathan Mayne (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1956), p. 309.

[18] "The Salon of 1846," ibid., p. 58. See also "The Salon of 1859," ibid., p. 239.

colors correspond").[19] Things that mutually correspond in this world all become symbolic when represented in music, painting, or poetry, all suggesting the order of things in the invisible world. This is precisely what Baudelaire sees as the spiritual significance of the art of Delacroix, whom he greatly admires as "the most suggestive of all painters."[20]

The great advocate for indirect suggestion in French symbolism is undoubtedly Stéphane Mallarmé, for whom suggestion becomes a matter of principle in poetry and poetics. In an interview with Jules Huret, he defines poetry and symbol in contradistinction to the notions held by the Parnassians:

> Nommer un objet, c'est supprimer les trois quarts de la jouissance du poëme qui est faite de deviner peu à peu: le suggérer, voilà le rêve. C'est le parfait usage de ce mystère qui constitue le symbole: évoquer petit à petit un objet pour montrer un état d'âme, ou, inversement, choisir un objet et en dégager un état d'âme, par une série de déchiffrements ("Sur l'évolution littéraire," OC, p. 869).

> [To name an object is to suppress three-quarters of the enjoyment of the poem which is made to be divined little by little: to suggest it, that's the dream. It is the perfect use of this mystery that constitutes the symbol: to evoke an object little by little in order to show a state of mind, or, inversely, to choose an object and bring forth from it a state of mind through a series of decipherings.]

Evidently, poetry for Mallarmé is not something one can grasp at a glance, clearly named or stated: it is but vaguely

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[19] French Symbolist Poetry, trans. C. F. MacIntyre (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1958), pp. 12-3.

[20] The Mirror of Art, p. 309.

implied, enshrouded in the mist of evocative language that works to build up a state of mind or a mood, a certain atmosphere, a feeling of something indefinite but beautiful, the experience of a mystery that can be deciphered only gradually, after much pondering and rumination. For Mallarmé, mystery remains at the heart of poetic symbolism. In an essay written at the age of twenty, he already realized that "Everything sacred that wants to remain sacred envelops itself in mystery" ("Toute chose sacrée et qui veut demeurer sacrée s'enveloppe de mystère" ["Hérésies artistiques: L'art pour tous," OC, p. 257]). Like religion, art is sacred and its mysteries must be kept from the vulgar eye, revealed only to the elect few. The young poet cries: "O golden clasps on old missals! O inviolate hieroglyphs on papyrus scrolls!" This youthful manifesto of Mallarmé's artistic élitism and mysticism, as Guy Michaud notes, "contains something approximating a key to his entire work."[21] "There must be something of the occult at the bottom of all things," says Mallarmé, advocating the kind of writing that suggests a hidden and obscure mystery on the white page ("Le Mystère dans les lettres," OC, p. 383).

Indeed, a typical Mallarmé poem is marvelously replete with mystery, deliberate obscurity, and the fading away of harsh outlines for the effect of something richly implicit and suggestive. The famous "L'Après-midi d'un faune" can serve as

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[21] Mallarmé, trans. Marie Collins and Bertha Humez (New York: New York University Press, 1965), p. 15.

a wonderful example.[22] The sultry air of a summer afternoon, the ambiguity of the faun's memory or his fantasy of capturing two nymphs on the borders of a quiet Sicilian marsh, the drowsy music that flows from his reed like "a sonorous and vain, monotonous line" ("Une sonore, vaine et monotone ligne"), his amorous ambition of seizing Venus herself on the top of Etna, his ensuing sense of guilt and punishment, and finally the hushing of all sounds when the faun falls asleep again, succumbing "unto the noon's haughty silence" ("au fier silence de midi")--all these combine to create an atmosphere of drowsiness, dream, and fantasy. The uncertainty of whether it is an illusion or reality perfectly illustrates Mallarmé's poetic principles, for in this poem as a whole, as Robert Greer Cohn maintains, "the unsureness itself is the theme."[23]

Moreover, the faun is representative of the poet who creates ex nihilo, out of his dream, memory, and imagination. Though he realizes that those nymphs "represent a desire of [his] fabulous senses!" ("Figurent un souhait de tes sens fabuleux!"), that their kiss but "this sweet nothing" ("ce doux rien"), he still plays on and tries to evoke their beautiful figures in his song. And it is his song that calls into being the woody scenery, through which, says the faun,

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[22] For the French original and English translation, I quote from MacIntyre's French Symbolist Poetry, pp. 56-63.

[23] Toward the Poems of Mallarmé (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1965), p. 17.

<u>Ne murmure point d'eau que ne verse ma flûte
Au bosquet arrosé d'accords; et le seul vent
Hors des deux tuyaux prompt à s'exhaler avant
Qu'il disperse le son dans une pluie aride,
C'est, à l'horizon pas remué d'une ride,
Le visible et serein souffle artificiel
De l'inspiration, qui regagne le ciel.</u>

murmurs no water but that poured from my flute
on the grove sprinkled with harmonies; the only wind
prompt to exhale from the twin-pipes before
it can disperse the sound in an arid rain,
is, on the horizon unstirred by a wrinkle,
the visible and serene artificial breath
of inspiration, which regains the sky.

Here the flow of music from the flute becomes water gushing in the woods, and the breath from the mouth turns into the wind: thus, natural scenery is superimposed on the image of poetry-making, and the scene described comes into being by the incantation of verse, the rhythmic movement of inhaling and exhaling. In this poem, as in Rilke's sonnet quoted earlier, poetry or saying make things happen in this imaginative world, where poetry is "the only wind," the "artificial breath / of inspiration," metaphors that marvelously anticipate Rilke's depiction of poetry as "a different breath, about / nothing. A gust inside the god. A wind"; or "<u>Atmen, du unsichtbares Gedicht! . . . in dem ich mich rhythmisch ereigne</u>" ("Breathing, you invisible poem! . . . wherein I rhythmically come to be").[24]

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[24] Rilke, <u>Die Sonette an Orpheus</u>, II, 1; <u>Sämtliche Werke</u>, 1:751.

For Mallarmé, "nothingness" (le Néant) is as important as for Rilke, and Michaud argues that it is Hegel who revealed to Mallarmé the positive meaning of nothingness as "Being in its first state: a negative state, since it cannot be defined by anything, but containing in itself every possibility, because everything must finally come out of it."[25] The Hegelian concept is given a poetic interpretation, and for Mallarmé, nothingness contains infinite possibilities of beauty and its expression in poetry. He told Henri Cazalis that "I have for the last month been in the purest glaciers of aesthetics--that after having found Nothingness, I have found the Beautiful" ("qu'après avoir trouvé le Néant, j'ai trouvé le Beau").[26] The way he describes his penetration of the mystery of beauty in nothingness conforms quite well to the Hegelian dialectic movement of the spirit from the negative state to affirmation in a final synthesis. He speaks of the universe finding its identity through him, of his metaphorical death and rebirth, that he is now no longer the Mallarmé he used to be, "but an aptitude the spiritual universe has for seeing and developing itself through what I was" ("mais une aptitude qu'a l'Univers spirituel à se voir et à se développer, à travers ce qui fut

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[25] Mallarmé, p. 53.

[26] "To Henri Cazalis, July 1866," Correspondance, I, ed. Henri Mondor with Jean-Pierre Richard (Paris: Gallimard, 1959), p. 220.

moi").[27] In other words, he sees himself as an agent, an impersonal vehicle, through which the world spirit will finally realize itself.

It is indeed quite tempting to interpret Mallarmé's claim of impersonality in terms of Hegelian dialectics, as Michaud does when he argues that Hegel's philosophy furnished the poet with answers to all his questions. According to Michaud, it is for the faithful reflection or representation of the world, the identification with the Idea of the universe, that the poet must become impersonal, making himself a mirror in which the spirit becomes conscious of itself. "Thus, the more impersonal one has succeeded in becoming," says Michaud, "the more faithfully one will reflect the world, favoring the advent of the Mind, which, by a dialectical process, should result in Synthesis, become identical with the very Idea of the universe, and, in so becoming, yield an exhaustive explanation of all reality."[28] Such a Hegelian interpretation, however, tends to ignore some crucial and profound differences between the poet's and the philosopher's understanding of the self-realization of the spirit, because the returning of the spirit to itself is for Hegel a transcendence of the concrete towards the absolute Idea, i. e., the self-realization of the Weltgeist in Hegel's own philosophy, while for Mallarmé, that

[27] "To Cazalis, May 14, 1867," ibid., p. 242.

[28] Mallarmé, p. 54.

realization cannot be a mere metaphysical abstraction. As Lloyd Austin argues, though we have here "a poet's variation on a Hegelian theme," for Mallarmé, "the culmination of the evolution of the Universe towards total self-consciousness would be, not a philosophical treatise, nor an emergent Deity, but a hymn."[29] Language mediates between the spiritual and the sensuous, and cannot be dismissed as merely supplementary to the abstract Idea. If language transposes a visible object into an invisible concept, that concept, being inherently linguistic and metaphorical, still vibrates with the materiality of its sensory origin. Mallarmé writes:

> A quoi bon la merveille de transposer un fait de nature en sa presque disparition vibratoire selon le jeu de la parole, cependant; si ce n'est pour qu'en émane, sans la gêne d'un proche ou concret rappel, la notion pure.
>
> Je dis: une fleur! et, hors de l'oubli où ma voix relègue aucun contour, en tant que quelque chose d'autre que les calices sus, musicalement se lève, idée même et suave, l'absente de tous bouquets ("Crise de vers," OC, p. 368).

> [What is the use of transposing a thing of nature into its vibrating near disappearance by the play of speech, if not to draw from it, without the constraint of a near and concrete reminder, the pure notion?
>
> I say: a flower! and out of the oblivion to which my voice relegates any contour, something other than the usual calyces, the sweet idea itself, musically arises, which is absent from all bouquets.]

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[29] "Presence and poetry of Stéphane Mallarmé: international reputation and intellectual impact," Poetic principles and practice: Occasional papers on Baudelaire, Mallarmé and Valéry (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 29.

As Mallarmé understands it, the pure notion of a flower, the sweet idea that arises from the music of speech, is more of an aesthetic idea than a rational concept.[30] The spiritual truth for Mallarmé is expressed not in abstract philosophy but in poetry; as he says: "J'ai fait une assez longue descente au Néant pour pouvoir parler avec certitude. Il n'y a que la Beauté--et elle n'a qu'une expression parfaite, la Poésie. Tout le reste est mensonge" ("I've made a long enough descent into Nothingness to be able to speak with certainty. There is only Beauty--and it has only one perfect expression, Poetry. All the rest is a lie").[31] Reminiscent of Keats' great ode on a Grecian urn, Mallarmé's identification of truth with beauty and its expression in poetry challenges the Hegelian concept of truth as realization of the spirit in abstracto, the self-presence of the logos in pure philosophical formulations. Indeed, Mallarmé's radical statement problematizes the very philosophical concept of truth that presupposes the presence of an origin, essence, or reality, which language and art try to imitate or re-present faithfully or truthfully, according to the principle of mimesis, the law of referentiality. It is precisely this concept of mimesis, the demand for mimetic fi-

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[30] It is useful here to recall Kant's division of all ideas into aesthetic and rational ones, that aesthetic ideas are related to imagination, understanding, and art. "Hence GENIUS," Kant remarks, "can also be explicated as the ability to [exhibit] aesthetic ideas" (Critique of Judgment, § 57, p. 217).

[31] "To Cazalis, May 14, 1867," Correspondance, I, p. 243.

delity or exact correspondence between copy and the original, that has raised the whole problem of representation.

By juxtaposing an excerpt from Plato's Philebus and Mallarmé's short essay Mimique, thereby forcing them into an intertextual close combat, Derrida questions the validity of precisely the kind of Hegelian reading of Mallarmé and the traditional Platonico-Hegelian notions of truth and representation. In Plato's text, the question of mimesis and truth is raised when Socrates privileges "the conjunction of memory with sensations" as a kind of internal writing, which "may be said as it were to write words in our souls" and give us "true opinion and true assertions," while dismissing as untruth the kind of external writing the "internal scribe" produces when he deviates from the ideal forms already inscribed in the soul, and "writes what is false" (Philebus 39a, pp. 1118-9). Of great importance to such classical concepts of mimesis and truth is the exact correspondence between copy and the original, imitation and the imitated, signifier and the signified: a correspondence that endeavors to emulate the ideal unification of meaning and speech in the logos. But here, by the side of Plato's text is Mallarmé's Mimique, a text responding to another text by another author, recounting the performance of a Mime whose unscripted gestures mimicking at once Pierrot the murderer and his murdered wife, carrying on, says Mallarmé, "a mute soliloquy that the phantom, white as a yet unwritten page, holds in both face and gesture at full length to his

soul."[32] Mallarmé conceives of the pantomime as a kind of gestural writing, which he reads about in a booklet, which in turn becomes the basis of his own writing. The doubling of writing and textuality offers an excellent case for Derrida's deconstructive reflections on classical notions of <u>mimesis</u> and truth. Reading Mallarmé's <u>Mimique</u>, says Derrida, is to enter "a textual labyrinth panelled with mirrors" (<u>D</u>, p. 195), where we find nothing but "a self-duplication of repetition itself; <u>ad infinitum</u>, since this movement feeds its own proliferation" (<u>D</u>, 191). In other words, the Mime's gestural and Mallarmé's actual writings are about nothing but their own textuality, the proliferation of writing itself. Since the Mime's gestures do not refer to any preexistent model or reality, it puts in question the very concept of <u>mimesis</u> as Plato and the entire philosophical tradition has understood it. "The Mime imitates nothing," Derrida argues. "There is nothing prior to the writing of his gestures. Nothing is prescribed for him. No present has preceded or supervised the tracing of his writing. His movements form a figure that no speech anticipates or accompanies. They are not linked with <u>logos</u> in any order of consequence" (<u>D</u>, pp. 194-5).

If truth is traditionally considered as the exact correspondence between reference and the referent, imitation and

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[32] Mallarmé, <u>OC</u>, p. 310. Quoted in Derrida, <u>Dissemination</u>, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 175; hereafter abbreviated as <u>D</u>.

the imitated, then the non-referentiality of the Mime's (and Mallarmé's) writing does tend to undermine the very concept of truth. To be sure, Mallarmé often talks about truth, the Idea, the spiritual universe, etc., but Derrida argues that he only "preserves the differential structure of mimicry or *mimesis*, but without its Platonic or metaphysical interpretation, which implies that somewhere the being of something that *is*, is being imitated" (*D*, p. 206). What seems a literary idealism in Mallarmé is just a "simulacrum of Platonism or Hegelianism," so it is "not simply false to say that Mallarmé is a Platonist or a Hegelian. But it is above all not true" (*D*, p. 207). What emerges from this deconstructive reading, then, is an anti-mimetic and anti-logocentric Mallarmé, a deconstructionist *avant la lettre*. Indeed, both Mallarmé and Ezra Pound can be seen as Derrida's precursors because, as Derrida himself observes, it is the "irreducibly graphic poetics" of Pound and of Mallarmé that mark "the first break in the most entrenched Western tradition" (*OG*, p. 92).

A direct consequence of Derrida's deconstructive reading, evident in his critique of Jean-Pierre Richard's thematic interpretation of Mallarmé's works, is suspicion about the search for meaning in Mallarmé criticism. Derrida holds that *Mimique* and Mallarmé's other texts do not refer to anything outside themselves, so it is impossible to see them as imitating, reflecting, or expressing anything. But that is precisely what thematic criticism does, since it "makes the text into

a form of expression, reduces it to its signified theme, and retains all the traits of mimetologism. What it retains in particular is that dialecticity that has remained profoundly inseparable from metaphysics, from Plato to Hegel" (D, p. 248). In opposition to Richard's notion of theme as the sum of multiple meanings or the putting in perspective of that multiplicity, Derrida claims that "the sum is impossible to totalize" and "the perspective extends out of sight" (D, p. 251). The "blank" or "white" (blanc) often found in Mallarmé's writing, for instance, cannot be semantically determined in any perspective not because its semantic valences are inexhaustible, but because there is always an extra or plus of blank, "a blank between the valences" (D, p. 252), which makes it possible to have differentiated meanings in the first place. A blank, in other words, is not a theme of the text but opens up the space for the text, forming the very condition of textuality itself. Any attempt to interpret Mallarmé's works semantically or thematically, says Derrida, would risk to "arrest its play or its indecision," to subsume it "within a philosophical or critical (Platonico-Hegelian) interpretation of mimesis;" and to become "incapable of accounting for that excess of syntax over meaning" (D, p. 231). Eventually, Derrida's reading leads to the erasure of meaning, the play of "signifiers unhooked, dislodged, disengaged from their historic polarization" (D, p. 236). What follows, of necessity, is the inevitable move that will replace the "hermeneutic

concept of <u>polysemy</u>" with the deconstructive "<u>dissemination</u>" (<u>D</u>, p. 262).

We may agree that if we reduce the play of signifiers to a single meaning or theme, and claim authority for a limited and limiting perspective, it would fail to do justice to the complexity of Mallarmé's text, only to impoverish its syntactic richness. But one begins to wonder whether it is really confusing literature with a sort of mystic obscurantism if what we read in Mallarmé does not make any sense at all, and the blank, as Derrida says in asserting the impossibility of meaning, "re-marks itself forever as disappearance, erasure, non-sense" (<u>D</u>, p. 253). The challenge as well as the pleasure of reading a difficult text, as I see it, lies precisely in deciphering its mystery and pattern of meaning, in putting it in perspective, if you will, when everything suddenly falls in place. In the reading process, meaning will always arise in a perspective, at least momentarily, and no matter how uncontrollable the play of signifiers, and how diverse the channels and directions of their dissemination, semantic and syntactic elements will always form an intelligible pattern out of the free play of speech. A text is made of multiple writings in a network of complex relationships, but as Roland Barthes suggests, "there is one place where this multiplicity is focused and that place is the reader . . . The reader is

the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost."[33]

It seems that many critics regard the banishment of meaning as problematic. In the translator's introduction to Dissemination, Barbara Johnson attempts to dispel the suspicion that deconstruction is "a form of textual vandalism designed to prove that meaning is impossible." No, Johnson assures us, it is not so. Deconstruction, in her felicitous phrase, is "the careful teasing out of warring forces of signification within the text itself;" in other words, it is a critical approach that simply "implies that a text signifies in more than one way, and to varying degrees of explicitness" (D, p. xiv). In his book on Derrida, Christopher Norris also tries to correct the impression that deconstruction propagates "the notion that texts cannot possibly `refer' to any world outside their own rhetorical domain."[34] In fact, Derrida himself seems to allow for the inevitable rise of meaning when he concedes that even though "strictly speaking," signifiers like "writing," "fold," "tissue," "text," etc. are no longer signifiers, "a conceptual strategy of some sort can temporarily privilege them as determinate signifiers" (D, p. 252). To put it summarily, then, deconstruction seems to operate negatively, for it

[33] "The Death of the Author," Image-Music-Text, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), p. 148.

[34] Derrida (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987), pp. 53-4.

is a mode of reading that does not so much annihilate meaning in general as putting in question any particular meaning or theme that arises in thematic criticism without having first critically examined its own metaphysical presumptions.

Whatever its results, Derrida's reading of Mimique does call attention to the crucial point that Mallarmé's writing comes out of the blank or nothingness of the white page, an obvious fact Mallarmé himself likes to emphasize and endow with a symbolic meaning. He often thinks of writing as a play of signifiers on a blank page. "Écrire" ("To write"), Mallarmé notes, "l'homme poursuit noir sur blanc" ("man pursues black on white" ["Quant au livre," OC, p. 370]). And he often thinks of other things as some sort of writing: the Mime's gestures are inscribed on "a yet unwritten page;" the dance, to be worthy of its name, should be "hiéroglyphe;" the ballet dancer is not a woman but a "metaphor," her movement "a corporeal writing" ("une écriture corporelle"), a "poem disengaged from all the apparatus of the scribe" ("poëme dégagé de tout appareil du scribe" ["Crayonné au théatre," OC, pp. 312, 304]). This may be compared with Rilke's Orphic sonnet II, 18 on a female dancer ("Tänzerin"), where the poet also portrays her features and movement as a kind of writing, "die deiner Braue dunkler Zug / rasch an die Wandung der eigenen Wendung geschrieben" ("the one the dark stroke of your eyebrow / quickly

wrote on the wall of your own turning").[35] As Haskell Block shows persuasively, Mallarmé's "vision of dance, like that of drama, is altogether nonrepresentational: in its pure and spiritualized expression, the dance does not copy anything."[36] Such an anti-mimetic view, however, does not eliminate spiritual or symbolic meaning in Mallarmé's texts because his emphasis on suggestion and silence, as Block says, eventually calls for "reverie and dream, for an apprehension of the mystery of the universe through its `incorporation visuelle de l'idée'."[37] In his "autobiographic" letter to Verlaine, Mallarmé speaks of the task of the poet in a manner that again reminds us of Rilke: "L'explication orphique de la Terre, qui est le seul devoir du poëte et le jeu littéraire par excellence" ("The Orphic explication of the Earth, that is the only duty of the poet and the literary game par excellence" ["Autobiographie," OC, p. 663]). If the Orphic ode does not refer to any definite object or reality, as "explication," it nevertheless unfolds the meaning of the world, recreating the earth in an ideal, beautiful form. This is put more clearly in Mallarmé's famous definition of poetry, formulated at Léo d'Orfer's request:

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[35] Rilke, Sämtliche Werke, 1:763.

[36] Mallarmé and the Symbolist Drama (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1963), p. 94.

[37] Ibid., p. 95.

La Poésie est l'expression, par le langage humain ramené à son rythme essentiel, du sens mystérieux des aspects de l'existence: elle doue ainsi d'authenticité notre séjour et constitue la seule tâche spirituelle.

[Poetry is the expression, through human language reduced to its essential rhythm, of the mysterious meaning of the aspects of existence: it thus bestows authenticity on our sojourn and constitutes the only spiritual task.][38]

This brief definition of poetry has three crucial points: language and its essential rhythm; expression of the mysterious meaning; and the spiritual task. As Austin remarks, this definition almost contains a whole philosophy of life: "But it is the philosophy of a poet, an artist in words, and the analysis of language and its different functions lies at the base of Mallarmé's poetics."[39] Here language stands out above all, for it is language that expresses the mysterious meaning of life, thereby fulfills the only spiritual task. By evoking the absent with words in their essential rhythm, the poet is able to create out of nothing, or as Mallarmé puts it, out of himself as his own center, "like a sacred spider onto the principal threads already woven out of my spirit" ("comme une

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[38] "To Léo d'Orfer, June 27, 1884," Correspondance, II, ed. Henri Mondor and Lloyd James Austin (Paris: Gallimard, 1965), p. 266.

[39] "Presence and poetry of Stéphane Mallarmé," Poetic principles and practice, p. 31.

araignée sacrée, sur les principaux fils déjà sortis de mon esprit").[40]

Mallarmé's sonnet "Surgi de la croupe et du bond" may exemplify the rising of poetry out of nothing, for the poem describes an empty vase that has no rose to grace its nothingness. The rhythm of the sonnet, as Austin notes, moves in accordance with the movement of our eyes. We first see an empty vase with no flower to cheer up the bitter evening hours, for where a flower should be, we only find the vase's broken neck. Suddenly, a voice speaks directly to us:

> Je crois bien que deux bouches n'ont
> Bu, ni son amant ni ma mère,
> Jamais à la même Chimère,
> Moi, sylphe de ce froid plafond!
> (OC, 74)
>
> [I believe the two mouths never drank,
> Neither my mother nor her lover,
> From the same Chimera,
> I, sylph of this cold ceiling!]

According to Austin, the voice belongs to "none other than the inexistent rose, a phantom hovering like a sylph beneath the cold ceiling."[41] This phantom flower tells us that it does not exist because it was never born, for its mother and her lover never drank together from the same Chimera of love. All there is in the poem, then, is the empty vase with nothing but "in-

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[40] "To Théodore Aubanel, July 28, 1866," Correspondance, I, pp. 224-5.

[41] "The mystery of a name," Poetic principles and practice, p. 71.

exhaustible widowhood" ("l'inexhaustible veuvage"), that is, barrenness and sterility. It is dying, but refuses to "Breathe out anything to announce / A rose amid the darkness" ("A rien expirer annonçant / Une rose dans les ténèbres"). And yet, it is precisely the absence of the flower that gives rise to this poem, for the sonnet exists to tell us the non-existence of its subject. Poetry comes out of the blank or nothingness, but we can also say that the inexistent flower comes into being by the incantation of words, that the poem makes present what is absent. In this sense, the sonnet exemplifies Mallarmé's poetics and becomes allegorical of itself, demonstrating the power of language to create and evoke an object ex nihilo.

Austin recognizes as the central theme or paradox of this sonnet that it "evokes a rose that just cannot be born." He then characterizes the poem as "one of anguish, expressing a desperate effort towards some impossible creation," which may perhaps "be linked up with the great problem of Mallarmé's life, the creation of the Great Work he dreamed of and which proved impossible."[42] We know that Mallarmé had this concept of a Great Book as the very telos of the universe, claiming "that everything in the world exists to end up in a book" ("que tout, au monde, existe pour aboutir à un livre" ["Le livre, instrument spirituel," OC, p. 378. See also p. 872]). In all his life, Mallarmé was obsessed with the idea of accom-

[42] Ibid., p. 72.

plishing this impersonal Great Work, which, as he told Verlaine, was "the Book, convinced that basically there is only one, attempted unknowingly by whoever has written, even the Geniuses" ("Autobiographie," OC, p. 663). It is in this context that he defines the task of the poet as the Orphic explication of the Earth. Evidently, the magic power of singing celebrated in the Orphic myth underlies Mallarmé's vision of accomplishing the Grand Oeuvre, but the irony is that Mallarmé's Great Book is never written. The anguish of the absent rose, Austin argues, reveals Mallarmé's anxiety that the creation of the Great Work is impossible. Of course, Mallarmé has composed some of the best poems in the French language, but all he has written, as seen in his own eyes, are mere fragments, "studies with a view of something better, like one tries out the nibs of one's pen before starting on the work" ("Bibliographie de l'Édition de 1898," OC, p. 77). Eventually, therefore, in Mallarmé we find again something like the mystic aspiration for the ineffable, which inspires and urges the poet to write but never allows him to attain to his final goal. As Haskell Block suggests, "the ideological premises of L'Oeuvre are to be found primarily in occult and mystical thought rather than in the Hegelian dialectic."[43] Perhaps we may even say that the mystic ineffable provides the poetic premises of Mallarmé's works as well, for he considers what

[43] Mallarmé and the Symbolist Drama, p. 54.

he has written as mere études, while the non-existent, unwritten Book constitutes the truly important part of his grand project. In this connection, it is interesting to note that both Mallarmé and Wittgenstein emphasize the supremacy of the silent word, the word that is unspoken and unwritten. Like Mallarmé, whose Great Book was never written, Wittgenstein told a friend that he originally intended to put in his preface to the Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus the following statement: "My work consists of two parts: the one presented here plus all that I have not written. And it is precisely this second part that is the important one."[44]

Given the importance of the unwritten and unspoken word, Mallarmé's appreciation of silence becomes comprehensible. For him, poetry is a silent music, residing in "the unspoken part of discourse" ("ce qui ne se dit pas du discours"), like some "air or song underneath the text" ("Le mystère dans les lettres," OC, pp. 386, 387). His aspiration for the unspoken and the inexpressible provides the theoretical premises for his emphasis on indirect suggestion, and in this respect, his influence on the symbolist movement cannot be overestimated. In this poetics of suggestion and evocation, silence is not at all the negation of language: on the contrary, it contains the infinite possibilities of speaking and singing. In this

[44] Wittgenstein, Briefe an Ludwig von Ficker, in Brenner Studien, vol. I, 35; quoted in Janik and Toulmin, Wittgenstein's Vienna, p. 192.

connection we may understand why Mallarmé's muse, St. Cecilia, the great patron saint of music, as portrayed in one of his most beautiful poems, is the patron of the kind of symbolist poetry that speaks more in implicit suggestion than in explicit language. Running her fingers in the soft plumage of the wings of an angel, she is portrayed as playing on a soundless instrument, as a great "Musicienne du silence."

3. TAO QIAN'S PLAIN STYLE

If the dialectic movement of the spirit, as Hegel described it in his Aesthetics, unavoidably leads up to the split of the inward vision and outward expression, it does not, however, creates the problem of language but merely intensifies it, making it a more urgent issue in the modern age and more self-conscious in modern poetry. The examples of Homer, Shakespeare, and Schiller in the previous chapter all testify that the difficulty of poetic articulation is not merely a crisis with poets like T. S. Eliot, Mallarmé, and Rilke, but a problem that has always inhabited the Western literary tradition, while Lu Ji, a third-century Chinese poet, provides yet another example with his Rhymeprose on Literature which clearly shows that the anxiety of poetic articulation is a perennial concern in Chinese poetics as well. A strong sense of the problems of language and interpretation, already evident in Lu Ji's poetic essay, was later brought to a more conscious

level and materialized in Chinese poetry in one way or another. This poetic sensibility, or what I would call the hermeneutic sense in the Chinese tradition, manifests itself beautifully in the works of a great poet in fourth-century China, Tao Qian (365-427), also known as Tao Yuanming. His poetry and prose often speak of the difficulty of speaking, and his uniquely simple style embodies a rather sophisticated understanding of the nature of language as well as a subtle way to deal with its inherent limitations.

We may recall that Lu Ji characterizes the problem of poetic language as a constant "anxiety that meaning does not match with things, and writing does not convey meaning. And this results not so much from the difficulty of knowing as from the limitation of one's ability."[45] Chinese poetry before and in Tao Qian's time can be seen as largely responding to this problem, trying desperately to counterbalance the incompetence of words by an extremely prodigal use of words. The _fu_ or rhymeprose at that time became especially extravagant with elaborate ornaments, and poetry in the period of the Six Dynasties is notorious for its flamboyant and ornate style. In their effort to overcome the inadequacy of language, poets in Tao Qian's time seemed to have forgotten that the problem, as Lu Ji put it astutely, "results not so much from the difficulty of knowing as from the limitation of one's ability,"

[45] _Wen xuan_ [A Literary Anthology], 1:239.

which was not to be solved by piling up words into a sort of verbal monstrosity. Against such a background, the poetry of Tao Qian appeared as a startlingly new phenomenon, which differed from that of his contemporaries precisely for its extreme frugality of words and a style noted for its unadorned simplicity. To the language problem Lu Ji raised, Tao Qian offered a solution that differed so drastically from the one his contemporaries sought, producing a poetry so alien to their ears and minds, that he was not taken seriously as a poet in his own time or immediately after, nor was his canonical status in classical Chinese literature firmly established till some five hundred years after his death.[46]

From the very beginning, Tao Qian's plain style poses a problem for readers and critics alike because its very transparency tends to obscure its significance and true values. When Tao Qian's friend Yan Yanzhi (384-456), himself a poet much admired at the time for his elaborate style, composed an eulogy in praise of Tao Qian's moral virtues, he practically ignored Tao's literary merits, only mentioning that Tao Qian in his writings "intended to get to the point."[47] To be sure,

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[46] For a detailed discussion of the vicissitude of Tao Qian's literary fame, see Qian Zhongshu, Tan yi lu [Discourses on Art], enlarged edition (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1984), pp. 88-93. For a discussion of Tao Qian in his literary milieu, see Kang-i Sun Chang, Six Dynasties Poetry (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), chap. I, pp. 3-46.

[47] Preface to Tao zhengshi lei [Eulogy on Tao Qian], in Wen xuan [A Literary Anthology], 3:791.

this was meant as a commendation, for Yan Yanzhi was alluding to Confucius's remark on the proper use of language that "So far as words can get to the point, that is enough" (LY, xv.41, p. 349), but in doing so, he tacitly dismissed Tao's writing for lacking the elaborate embellishment and rhetorical fireworks he and his contemporaries so highly valued in poetry. To most readers of his time, then, Tao Qian's poems must have appeared rather crude and colorless, marked by their artless simplicity, reserve, and reticence, so much so that none of his contemporaries held him in high regard as a poet. That may explain why two important works of criticism written within one hundred years after his death, Liu Xie's (465?-522) Wenxin diaolong [The Literary Mind or the Carving of Dragon] and Zhong Rong's (459-518) Shi pin [Ranking of Poetry], all failed to do him justice: the former did not mention Tao Qian at all, while the latter put him in the "middle rank," i. e., only as secondary, though honoring him as "the paragon of all hermit poets, past and present."[48] In all likelihood, Tao was simply out of tune with his time, for he neither wrote the kind of wooden "metaphysical poetry" (xuanyan shi), which was the literary fashion when he was young, nor followed the ornate style that later became increasingly the predominant mode of writing for his contemporaries. He stood all by himself, as Kang-i Sun Chang observes: "He was all alone, for he lived in

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[48] Shi pin [Ranking of Poetry], in He Wenhuan ed. Lidai shihua [Remarks on Poetry from Various Dynasties], 1:13.

a period of transition, and was judged by a set of poetic criteria directly opposed to his own literary taste."[49] It was indeed the verdict of earlier critics that Tao Qian had at best a lackluster performance in writing, and that his language was too flat to be really poetic. Even Du Fu (712-770), the great poet of the High Tang period, in spite of his deep respect for Tao, still found it difficult to appreciate his poetry:

> Old Tao Qian who shunned the world
> May not have attained the tao thereby.
> Reading his poems, I feel it a pity:
> His language is so seared and dry.[50]

The question is, why would Tao Qian use a "seared and dry" language many poets considered as inadequate for poetic expression? Why would he choose to write in a sort of zero degree style when flowery language was the accepted norm of his time? When we read his poetry and prose, it soon becomes clear that Tao Qian was never bent on following the trend of his time--in life as well as in making poetry. For more than fifteen hundred years, he is justly famous for refusing to humble himself before his superiors and protesting that "How

[49] Six Dynasties Poetry, p. 13.

[50] "Qianxing wu shou" [Five Poems Written as Discharge of Emotions], in Du Shaoling ji xiangzhu [Annotated Edition of the Works of Du Fu], ed. Qiu Zhao-ao, 10 vols. (Peking: Wenxue guji, 1955), 4:21.

can I bow to a country boor just for five pecks of rice!"[51] With these proud words he quit the minor official post and, like an ancestral Candide, retreated to tend his own garden and live the simple but hard life of a peasant. Le style est l'homme may be a deceptive cliché, but in the case of Tao Qian, there is a close relation between his style of living and his style of writing, both being the result of a choice consciously made by the poet, and both having simplicity as the definitive feature. Traditional criticism has exalted Tao Qian's moral integrity as a man and the edifying effect of his poetry, but it has largely failed to notice that the same principled adherence to what he believed to be true in nature and life has determined his use of language. Zhong Rong's characterization of Tao Qian as "the paragon of all hermit poets, past and present," though a bit oversimplified, does point out the most salient features of Tao's poetry and personality: his aversion to the insincerity and pretentiousness of officialdom, his awareness of the perils lurking at every corner of a political career, his appreciation of the simple

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[51] In the year of 405, Tao Qian was appointed Magistrate of Pengze, a grass-roots-level office, but he quit the job after only eighty days, for he would rather resign than put on his official dress and call on the Inspector sent by a higher office. This famous episode is first reported in the biography of Tao Yuanming in juan 93 of Shen Yue's (441-513) Song shu [History of the Song Dynasty] (8 vols. [Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1974], 8:2287), and then copied in several other standard historical records as well as Tao's biography written by Xiao Tong (501-531), the Prince of Liang, compiler of the famous Wen xuan [A Literary Anthology], who also edited the first collection of Tao Qian's works.

joy at home and in cultivating one's own garden, and his love of nature. However, many critics have overlooked his search for a language that could express, in a form as congenial as possible, the purity and simplicity he so highly valued in life. Artificial ornaments are incompatible with the sense of natural spontaneity as he understood it, so he refused to adopt the contemporary flowery style. That may explain why so few of his imitators could achieve the effect of simplicity, so closely identified with Tao Qian's style, since he not just wrote about the simple life of a farmer: he lived such a life. Indeed, for Tao Qian, experience is perhaps more important than expression, and much of what we experience in nature and life, he would argue, is beyond expression in language.

Tao Qian's life and personality are woven into the text of his poetry in such a way that it becomes possible for us to read his works as a kind of poetic autobiography.[52] It is autobiography in the sense that most of his poems talk about his life as a farmer, commenting on it as in search for a deeper meaning, with the poet as subject of his own writing.

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[52] Two recent studies have recognized the close relationship of Tao Qian's writing with his life, and read his works as poetic autobiography. See Kang-i Sun Chang's chapter on Tao Qian, especially section II, "Poetry as Autobiography," in Six Dynasties Poetry, pp. 16-37; see also Stephen Owen, "The Self's Perfect Mirror: Poetry as Autobiography," in The Vitality of the Lyric Voice: Shih Poetry from the Late Han to the T'ang, ed. Shuen-fu Lin and Stephen Owen (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), pp. 71-88. Further references to Owen's essay, abbreviated as "Mirror," will be included in the text.

It is at the same time poetic not just because of its form but because our knowledge of Tao Qian's life and personality comes from our reading of his poetry, in and by which his image as a hermit poet is created. In an essay on the presentation of self-image in Chinese poetry, Stephen Owen sees Tao Qian as "the first great poetic autobiographer" ("Mirror," p. 78), one who was conscious of the problem of truth and representation. "Authenticity," Owen argues, "must be autobiography's first concern" ("Mirror," p. 74), but authenticity is always vitiated by the autobiographer's presentation of himself not as what he is but what he wishes to be, and by autobiography as a genre in which "the human ceases to be an innocent unity of nature and action; he is now a doubleness, an outward appearance concealing, dimming, or distorting some true and hidden nature" ("Mirror," p. 75). Thus, in reading Tao Qian's poetry as "autobiography," Owen undertakes to disclose Tao's self-image, that of a farmer-recluse, as inevitably containing "a doubleness--a true self and a surface role" ("Mirror," p. 78). For him, Tao Qian's simple language becomes a device of the surface that conceals, dims, or distorts the true and hidden nature of the poet; therefore, to read Tao Qian is to penetrate the surface of this simple language and reach the poet's true self in its full complexity.

Tao Qian's first poem in Returning to Dwell in My Fields and Gardens, for example, reveals the problem of the "double self." It is likely, Owen presumes, that we would take the

speaker in the poem as a "mere peasant," only to find that the peasant is in fact Tao Qian, a very sophisticated and self-conscious poet, who distances himself from us as the "common" herd:

> In youth, nothing in me followed the common rhythm,
> It is my nature always to love hills and mountains.
> By mischance I fell into the net of dust,
> And kept away from home for so many years.
> A fastened bird longs for its familiar grove,
> A fish in the pool remembers old deep waters.
> I've tilled some soil at the edge of southern moor,
> With simplicity intact, I return to farm my land.
> My homestead extends to a couple of acres,
> And eight or nine rooms with thatched roof.
> Elms and willows shade my back eaves,
> Rows of peach and plum grow before my hall.
> Half-hidden is the village of secluded people,
> Slowly wispy smoke arises from their houses.
> A dog barks in the depth of a small lane,
> A cock crows on top of a mulberry tree.
> No dust soils the pure air within my doors,
> In my bare rooms I find plenty of leisure.
> Too long I have been caged like a prisoner,
> Now at last, I come back to nature.[53]

Owen argues that in spite of the poet's claim to have achieved the unity of self and role in coming back to nature with "simplicity intact," the poem betrays its own doubleness, the inevitable discrepancy between the poet's appearance of a farmer and his desire to be a farmer; indeed, the desire itself indicates the lack of a farmer's rustic simplicity. What attracts us in Tao Qian, Owen maintains, is precisely this "complex desire for simplicity rather than simplicity it-

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[53] Tao Yuanming ji [Tao Yuanming's Works], ed. Lu Qinli (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1979), p. 40; hereafter abbreviated as Tao ji.

self" ("Mirror," p. 77). Thus, Tao Qian, he declares, "is not the naive and straightforward poet he claims to be" ("Mirror," p. 81). Owen is suspicious not only of the poet's claim to simplicity but also of our credulous acceptance of such a claim. Since Tao Qian is highly conscious of his complex self behind a simple surface, Owen argues that a sophisticated reader of Tao's poetry should learn to distrust the surface and question the authenticity of the image that emerges from the poetic text. Those who believe Tao Qian is a farmer are likely to be fooled or shocked. "We made a mistake," Owen admits on behalf of such credulous readers, "we thought this was a farmer, and it turned out to be T'ao Ch'ien" ("Mirror," p. 79).

Such a skeptical attitude certainly has the advantage of being able to probe deeper into the psychological and textual substructures of the poem. The problem is, however, that a reader who opens a volume of Tao Qian's poems is unlikely to fancy that those poems are written by a "mere peasant." Most Chinese scholars and commentators see Tao Qian as a hermit poet who kept himself far from the madding crowd, an image espoused by Tao's own writings. Some have argued that in spite of his professed love of hills and mountains, Tao Qian is in fact deeply concerned about the political situation of the state, a view not without some textual support in his poetry. In the tradition of Chinese criticism, however, nobody has ever taken Tao Qian as an ordinary farmer. Perhaps at this

point, we may realize that the presumed naiveté of an unsophisticated reader is merely a rhetorical device Owen uses to make a case for his own skeptical attitude, his distrust of Tao Qian's simple language. But Owen's skepticism is never skeptical of its own presumptions: it never applies to the concept of "doubleness" the same rigorous questioning it applies to Tao Qian's poetry. Presumably, the image of Tao Qian as a farmer-recluse is not the Tao Qian we could have known, had we lived fifteen hundred years ago and known him personally, but since we cannot know him as a next-door neighbor in all the trivia and minutia of daily life, the farmer-recluse or hermit poet is the only Tao Qian we can ever know. In fact, what is the "true self" of Tao Qian outside any textual construction is an immaterial and impertinent question to ask, since all we know are the texts by and about Tao Qian, and he can be known to us only through the mediation of those texts and our interpretation of them. Therefore, to penetrate the textual simplicity in search of Tao Qian's "true and hidden nature" does not seem to help much in understanding his simple language, but rather risks losing sight of the distinctive features of his plain style.

Nevertheless, Owen's advice to look for doubleness can be helpful not because it reveals a discrepancy between role and self, but because it calls our attention to the way Tao Qian's poems are structured around different sets of values. In the poem quoted above, for instance, we can see the tension

within the text not as between the surface role of a farmer and the true identity of the poet, but as two opposed ways of life: life in the countryside that accommodates one with the basic material needs, while unfolding the regenerating value and beauty of nature, as opposed to the life confined to an official post, tightly controlled by etiquette and rigid regulations. This opposition is symbolized by two sets of images: on the one hand are the "net of dust," the fastened bird, the fish in the pool, the cage and prison; and on the other, hills and mountains, the lovely country house, the quiet village of secluded people, and the light smoke rising over the chimneys. Significantly, Tao Qian does not say that he discovers nature, for it has always been his "nature" to love hills and mountains, so in returning to the fields, he is coming "back to nature," returning both to the outward natural world and to his inner nature, his own self. And yet, returning to the self already implies a distance, that one has, at least for some time, been alienated from one's self. For Tao Qian, that self-alienation, a momentary separation from his own nature, is his fall into "the net of dust," that is, his brief entanglement in officialdom, which he now admits to be a mistake and contrasts with the purity of his private life, unsoiled by dust of any kind.

There is no question that the poet is on the side of nature, its purity, simplicity, and freedom, therefore the simple style of Tao Qian's poetry is thematically significant,

related to his acceptance of life in the "fields and gardens," his preference for the "pure air" in his "bare rooms," and his rejection of the pomposity, rigidity, and artificiality of officialdom. His sketch of the village scene is remarkably new and fresh, for the picture of a dog barking in a deep lane and a cock crowing on top of a mulberry tree, with its simple vocabulary and natural rhythm, is really unheard of in earlier poetry. A few folk songs in the ancient Book of Poetry may be comparable, but the language of those songs was archaic even in Tao Qian's time, and thus could not have the same freshness as his simple depiction. Tao Qian's stylistic simplicity is of course not simple, as it signifies more than what literally gets said. Many of Tao Qian's contemporaries failed to see this, and Yan Yanzhi missed precisely this point when he declared that Tao in his writings only "intended to get to the point." The richness of Tao Qian's language was not clearly recognized until the great poet Su Shi (1037-1101) made the observation that Tao's language was "dry outside but full of marrow inside, seemingly insipid but actually delectable."[54] The theoretical justification for Tao Qian's plain style is not grounded on Confucius' pragmatic concern, but on an understanding of the nature of language totally different from that of his contemporaries. Evidently, Tao Qian was a lonely poet

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[54] "Comment on the Poetry of Han Yu and Liu Zhongyuan," Su Shi wenji [Collected Prose Works of Su Shi], 6 vols., ed. Kong Fanli (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1986), 5:2110.

in his time, and he knew he was. He made no secret of his desire for understanding, hence his often expressed wish to find a sympathetic reader, "the one who knows the sound" (zhi-yin). When he found it difficult to fulfil that wish among his contemporaries, he would go back in time and converse with men of his own calibre in past history. Each of the seven poems On Poor Gentlemen is speaking of and to a historical figure Tao Qian admires, and the first poem in that group makes his yearning for friendly understanding quite perceptible:

> The ten thousand creatures have their reliance,
> Only the solitary cloud floats without support.
> Fainter and fainter, it dissolves in the sky,
> When is the time we see its last glimmer?
> The morning glow breaks the lingering mists,
> Flocks of birds start their flight together.
> Slowly, slowly, a bird soars out of the woods,
> And comes back again before it is dark.
> Knowing its strength, it keeps the old route,
> How can it escape from cold and hunger?
> When no one is here to know the sound,
> What use is there to strike a sad note?
> (Tao ji, p. 123)

The solitary cloud that vanishes without a trace and the bird that keeps its old route despite all hardships at once call to mind the image of our lonely poet, whose solitude is made explicit in the last two lines in which the sad note sounds even sadder where it dies down without being heard. But in saying so, the sound of the poet is heard, for by seeking friends in the past, Tao Qian actually speaks to the future, to readers of future generations who will know and understand his note. Here we come near a strategy that is quite essential

to Tao Qian's poetry, namely, the strategy of invoking the presence of something by indicating its absence. The famous fifth poem in the group entitled Yin jiu [Drinking Wine] can serve as a wonderful example:

> I built my humble house in this world of men,
> But there is no noise of carriages and horses.
> You may ask, sir, how is it possible?
> With the mind aloof, the place will be remote.
> Picking chrysanthemums under the eastern hedge,
> Unawares I catch sight of the southern hills.
> The mountain air is fair in the lovely sunset,
> And flocks of birds are returning to their nests.
> There is a true meaning in all of these,
> But when I try to explain, I forget my words.
> (Tao ji, p. 89)

In this lovely poem, we see Tao Qian as a quiet and unobtrusive man who prefers to live alone and keep his humble house in seclusion amidst the hustle and bustle of the world, holding himself in silent communion with the truth and beauty of nature. The first two lines set up the opposition between the poet's private world within his "humble house" and the "world of men" with its "noise of carriages and horses," an opposition which is significant both structurally and thematically, reappearing time and again in Tao Qian's poetry. In the second poem of Returning to Dwell in My Fields and Gardens, for example, we find a variation on the same theme: "In the wild country, I have little to do with men, / In these poor lanes, wheels and harness are rare" (Tao ji, p. 41). It is important to know that in Chinese antiquity, only the emperor and his ministers were privileged to ride in horse-drawn carriages,

such imagery in Tao Qian's poem, therefore, does not refer to the ordinary people but metonymically stands for courtiers and high ranking officials, and his preference for poor lanes that admit no big carriages by no means indicates his "misanthropy" but his contempt of aristocratic pomposity and haughtiness. His use of "carriages and horses" may allude to Zhuangzi's use of "carriages and caps" as symbols of transient political power, which the philosopher dismisses as external things "the body uses, but not part of one's inborn nature" (Z, xvi, p. 246).

According to Zhu Ziqing (1898-1948), the first four lines may allude to a phrase in the Zhuangzi where the Prince Mu of Zhongshan feels dismayed that "Though my body is by the river and the sea, my mind still resides under the gate of the Wei palace" (Z, xxviii, p. 421). As a prince, he finds it difficult to completely abandon the life at court and dwell in the wild with the tranquil mind of a hermit. If that is true, then Tao Qian's use of the phrase reverses its original meaning, for the poet is saying that he has tranquility of the mind, the bliss of solitude at heart, even though he lives in the world of men.[55] It seems to me that the idea expressed in the first four lines, that the inner tranquility of the mind can turn the noisy world into a quiet dwelling place, may also

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[55] See Zhu Ziqing, "Shi duoyi juli" [Examples of Poetic Polysemy], in Zhu Ziqing gudian wenxue zhuanji [Zhu Ziqing's Writings on Classical Chinese Literature] (Shanghai: Shanghai guji, 1981), 1:67.

allude to what Zhuangzi says about xin zhai or the emptying of the mind in the chapter entitled Renjian shi [The World of Men]: that the mind is able to cope with anything once it is devoid of worldly ambitions and concerns (Z, iv, pp. 67-8). The next few lines provide a beautiful portrayal of this inner tranquility with which the poet retires to his own garden, picking chrysanthemums under the eastern hedge, catching sight of splendid mountains and forests without conscious effort. But what is most famous about this poem and also most relevant to our discussion of Tao Qian's hermeneutic sense are the last two lines, in which the poet tells us that there is true meaning in nature, but he forgets all words the very moment he tries to explain it.

Here, Tao Qian is alluding to a famous passage from the Zhuangzi that words exist for the meaning, just as the trap exists for the fish, so "once you've got the fish, you forget the trap," and "once you've got the meaning, you forget the word" (Z, xxvi, p. 407). For Zhuangzi, meaning is something one may grasp intuitively and keep in knowing silence, but cannot put in words. So when the poet says he forgets words, he must have already got the meaning of nature. However, as a poet, he must not only understand the meaning but also articulate what he has understood; the forgetting of words may thus suggest frustration in his effort to speak, the anxiety that he can never put the true meaning of nature into words. In a way, the poet is not unlike Mad Crank, an allegorical

figure in the Zhuangzi who mumbles, when asked about the meaning of tao, "'Ah, I know it and will tell you.' But at the moment when he wants to say it, he forgets what word it is that he wants to say" (Z, xxii, p. 319). For Zhuangzi, such a mad gesture signals a true knowledge of the tao, since tao cannot be put in words. "To explain," Zhuangzi maintains, "is not as good as to keep silent, for tao cannot be heard" (Z, xxii, p. 326). In such a context, then, the forgetting of words not only indicates the poet's inability to speak, but also points to a superior way of conveying meaning in suggestive silence. That is exactly how the true meaning of nature is implied in this poem, for it first affirms that there *is* a true meaning, and then leaves that meaning unexpressed. Here, the philosophical premise that determines Tao Qian's choice of linguistic and stylistic simplicity becomes fairly clear: since the experience of meaning is beyond language, it is better to leave it unexpressed than to give it an inadequate expression. As Yu-kung Kao argues in discussing this poem, any articulation will destroy the poet's intuitive understanding, therefore Tao Qian's "sudden forgetfulness of expression is the only way to assure his possession of this knowledge."[56]

Resounding with so many intertextual echoes from the Zhuangzi, Tao Qian's poem clearly shows his awareness of the

[56] "The Aesthetics of the Regulated Verse," in Lin and Owen, ed., The Vitality of the Lyric Voice, p. 371.

complicated issue of language as well as his way to deal with the difficulty of poetic articulation. No explicit expression, only indirect suggestion: that is the main principle of this poetics of silence. What is remarkable about poetry is not that it has a beautiful meaning, but that its meaning always exceeds the limits of the text; and what is remarkable about this particular poem by Tao Qian is that it thematizes this excess of meaning and becomes allegorical of its own indeterminacy. Instead of making a statement about the true meaning of nature and thereby precluding further exploration, Tao Qian simply affirms the presence of meaning and invites each reader to interpret it in his or her own way. The true meaning of nature literally extends out of the boundary of the text; it is not diminished by the poet's confession of incapacity, but enriched in the infinite possibilities of interpretation. That is essentially the strength of Tao Qian's poetry, the charm and justification of his plain style. That is also what later poets and critics accepted from Tao Qian as an important legacy in the tradition of Chinese poetry and poetics when they finally recognized the value of his seemingly barren language.

If the language of poetry is highly suggestive, playing on all the ambiguities and associations of words, and if many things are deliberately left unsaid rather than explicitly expressed, it then becomes inevitable that the meaning of a poem would transcend its literal sense and cannot be strictly definable. As Gadamer remarks, "the language of art means the

excess of meaning that is present in the work itself. The inexhaustibility that distinguishes the language of art from all translation into concepts rests on this excess of meaning."[57] In other words, the indeterminacy of meaning and the infinite possibilities of interpretation are related to the very nature of poetic language. In the Chinese tradition, the inadequacy of language and the limitation of any particular interpretation is readily recognized, and it is almost taken for granted that a poem may be read in many different ways and have different interpretations. In this respect, Tao Qian again provides us with an interesting example in his playful biography of a certain Mr. Five Willows, who is recognizably Tao himself.[58] Let me quote the first part of this Biography:

> We do not know where this gentleman came from, nor are we sure of his real name. Around his house were five willow trees, and he took his name from them. He was a quiet man of few words, having no interest in seeking glory or fortune. He liked to read books, but did not try to have a thorough understanding of them. And yet, whenever he did grasp something, he would be so happy that he would forget about his meals.
>
> (Tao ji, p. 175)

Mr. Five Willows is indeed Tao Qian's self-portrait. It is sketchy, but the image comes out alive with a few strokes.

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[57] "Aesthetics and Hermeneutics," in Philosophical Hermeneutics, p. 102.

[58] In Tao's biography, Shen Yue says that the Biography of Mr. Five Willows so closely resembles Tao's own life, that "his contemporaries all took it as a factual account" (Song shu [History of the Song Dynasty], 8:2287).

The first thing that strikes us in this text is the negative mode of speaking: we do not know the man's origin or his name; he does not seek fame of fortune; he likes to read but does not try to understand; etc. As Qian Zhongshu remarks, in the Biography of Mr. Five Willows, the word bu [no, not] is "the key [literally the `eye', yanmu] to the whole text" (GZB, 4:1228). We have seen how the absence at the center of poetic text becomes the source of presence in Mallarmé's sonnet on the empty vase, and how the negative mode of speaking works to present what is absent in Rilke's Archaic Torso of Apollo. Here again, we have a text in which the negative mode prevails and bears directly on the meaning of the whole work. We do not know the origin or name of this gentleman, for Mr. Five Willows is just a provisional name, a name arbitrarily taken from the willow trees that happen to grow around his house. This may be an indication of Tao Qian's reaction against the trend of his time, which is notorious for the snobbish vanity of the aristocrats who took such pride in their family names. But on a thematic level, there is something more to it, for the poet may be suggesting that the essence of the man, like that of all things, cannot be put into words. As Laozi and Zhuangzi have repeatedly emphasized, names are arbitrary and empty; so the anonymity of Mr. Five Willows may be alluding to the beginning of the Laozi that "The name that can be named is not the constant name" (L, i.1, p. 1). The true nature of a person, like the true meaning of nature, is ineffable, thus a

provisional name like Mr. Five Willows is just as adequate as any other name. Or better still, because it is not a real name, it may leave the true nature of the person intact. In his biography of Tao Qian, Shen Yue recorded an interesting legend, repeated by later biographers, that though Tao Qian was not very knowledgeable in music, he kept a lute without strings and liked to play on it when he had drunk wine and was in the right mood.[59] We read in the Laozi that "The great note is without sound. The great image has no shape. The tao hides itself in being nameless" (L, xli.91, p. 26). Zhuangzi also describes truly great music as beyond sound and form: "Listening to it, you hear no sound; looking at it, you see no shape. Yet it fills heaven and earth, and enwraps the whole universe" (Z, xiv, p. 90). Thus, by calling himself Mr. Five Willows, the poet is making a gesture, like playing a soundless music on a lute without strings, which implies not only his awareness of the difficulty of articulation but also his strategy of conveying meaning in keeping silent.

Mr. Five Willows is remarkable in that he likes to read but never bothers fully to understand what he is reading. This certainly does not mean that he is too lazy or too stupid to understand, for we know that whenever he does grasp something, he would be so excited that he would forget to eat. From yet another poem, the first one of Yi ju [On Moving House], we

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[59] Shen Yue, ibid., 8:2288.

also know that the poet and his friends would "enjoy together the marvels of fine writing, / And clarify the text when meaning is in doubt" (Tao ji, p. 56). Even though giving up thorough understanding may indicate Tao Qian's reaction against the far-fetched, scholastic interpretations of Confucian classics, on a thematic level, it may also suggest that Mr. Five Willows is aware that meaning cannot be determined once and for all in one particular reading, that there can be no final or absolute understanding, and that one should keep one's mind open to the possibility of different interpretations. Dramatized by Tao's writing, the openness of the mind is a profound insight in traditional Chinese poetics, which recognizes all interpretations as valuable but no interpretation as final.

In Tao Qian's writings, the hermeneutic problem finds a literary formulation on both sides of the text, i. e., from the author's and the reader's points of view. When the poet claims that he knows the presence of meaning but forgets how to put it in words, he discloses the inadequacy of language and the difficulty of articulation; and when he claims that he does not seek thorough understanding, he points out the indeterminacy of meaning and the open-ended orientation of all interpretations. Like most Chinese poets, Tao Qian never formulates his views as a systematic theory, but the invaluable moments of insight in his poems and prose works should enable us to catch a glimpse of his mind and put it in the larger

context of a consistent hermeneutic theory. In such matters, Zhuangzi's influence is extremely important not only because Tao often refers to Zhuangzi's writings but also because his use of Zhuangzi turns the linguistic skepticism of a mystic-philosopher into a positive way to solve the problem of language. Both sides of the signifying word, its limitation and its suggestiveness, are memorably expressed in the poet's forgetting of words. It is a moment that at once indicates the difficulty of articulation and the poet's skilful use of silence to overcome that difficulty. In the context of speech, we now realize, silence can sometimes say so much more than words. Perhaps that is why in great works of literature, as in great music, we often find the climactic moment a moment of pause or silence. Bai Juyi, a Chinese poet of the late eighth and early ninth century, has this famous line to describe the effect of such pause in music: "At this moment, silence excels all sounds."[60] Hamlet's dying words that "the rest is silence" (v.ii.358) can provide another good example, for in that particular context, his silence certainly touches us more deeply than anything he could have uttered. Perhaps this is also what Tao Qian tries to imply by playing on that stringless lute. Like forgetting words or forgetting the real name of Mr. Five Willows, it is a kind of mystic gesture for

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[60] Pipa yin [The Pipa Player's Song], in Bai Juyi ji [Works of Bai Juyi], ed. Gu Xuejie, 4 vols. (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1985), 1:242.

capturing the true meaning and expressing it in suggestive silence. Mallarmé's muse, the great "Musicienne du silence," naturally comes to our mind. So do Rilke's wonderful lines: "Schweigen. Wer inniger schwieg, / rührt an die Wurzeln der Rede" ("Be silent. Who keeps silent inside / touches the roots of speech"). In such moments, the helpless, passive silence suddenly unfolds itself as meaningful, active silence, and what cannot be said because of the limitation of language becomes what is deliberately left unsaid when the poet discovers the rich implications of silence, the evocative power of suggestive language. The limitation and the suggestiveness of language are in fact not contradictory but complementary, for they are the two sides of the same symbolic function. In such a perspective, we may understand why Tao Qian's largely unadorned style impresses us much more powerfully than the poetry of most of his contemporaries, for his simple language becomes powerful by virtue of its very simplicity, its potentials and implications. When we have read Tao Qian and the other poets of his time, we may feel that while other writers in their ornateness, their wordiness and verbosity, have said very little, Tao Qian in his simple language, his reticence, and his use of silence, has said infinitely more.

CHAPTER IV. AUTHOR, TEXT, READER

> There are as many points of view
> From which to regard her
> As there are sides to a round bottle.
>
> Wallace Stevens,
> Three Travelers Watch
> a Sunrise

> Der wahre Leser muß der erweiterte Autor seyn. Er ist die höhere Instanz, die die Sache von der niedern Instanz schon vorgearbeitet erhält.
>
> [The true reader must be the extended author. He is the superior court that takes the case already prepared by the lower court.]
>
> Novalis, Paralipomena
> zum Blütenstaub, 138.

1. THE ILLUSION OF IDENTITY

In one of the ancient Chinese classics, the Book of Documents, it is recorded that the legendary sage-king Shun (traditionally dated 21st century B. C.) initiated Chinese poetics with these three words: "Shi [Poetry] yan [speaks of] zhi [intention]." Shun ordered his minister Kui to be in charge of the education of royal princes, using poetry and music as a means to achieve harmonious relationship between gods and men, to the extent that when poetry was chanted to the melody, "all

the hundred animals would dance to it accordingly."[1] Although these words may have been coined much later than the time of Shun and ascribed to him for loaned authority, they do record a very ancient idea current at least in the 6th century B. C., and form one of the oldest tenets in Chinese theories of literature. In contrast to the Greek idea of divine inspiration, which locates the origin of poetry beyond the reach of the poet and his conscious language, the Chinese concept defines both the provenance and function of poetry within the range of human faculties, taking poetry as an activity motivated and governed by the poet's intention. This is further elaborated in the influential "Great Preface" to the Book of Poetry: "Poetry is that toward which intention moves. While at heart it is intention; coming out in words, it becomes poetry."[2] With language as its medium, poetry is here conceived of as the outer expression of what is intended to be its inner substance. The Chinese concept of zhi, here translated as intention, be it an intellectual or emotional state of mind, an ambition or a strong desire, a real or imagined experience, inevitably presupposes the presence of a human agent, the operation of an intending subject. Unlike the divinely inspired Greek poet who does not understand the meaning of his

[1] Shangshu zhengyi [The Book of Documents], in Ruan Yuan, ed., Shisan jing zhushu [Thirteen Classics with Annotations], 1:131.

[2] Mao shi zhengyi [The Book of Poetry], ibid., 1:269.

own work, the Chinese poet, according to this definition, is clearly the creator of meaning, since his intention, what he conceives of in the mind or experiences at heart, constitutes the origin of his poetry. It seems only natural, then, that the meaning of a poem should be what the poet intends it to mean, and that his intention, the pretextual mens auctoris, should be the ultimate point of reference, the goal of all interpretations.

This intentionalist hermeneutics has a powerful endorsement in the works of Mencius (371?-289? B. C.), who is held as a great sage and important thinker in the Confucian tradition, second only to Confucius himself. In his conversations with Xianqiu Meng, Mencius objects to rigid literalism in the interpretation of the Book of Poetry, and evokes intention of the poet as the frame of reference for interpreting lines that may otherwise seem absurd or unintelligible. Having demonstrated to his interlocutor how to make sense of poetic lines by attending to their intended meaning in the original context, Mencius summarizes his exegetical method:

> Thus, the interpreter of a poem should not let the words obscure the text, or the text obscure the intention. To trace back to the original intention with sympathetic understanding: that is the way to do it. If one should merely understand the text literally, then consider these lines from the poem Yun han: "Of the remaining populace of Zhou / Not one single soul survived." Taken as literal truth, this would mean that of all the Zhou people not a single

person remained alive.[3]

That is to say, a literal reading of those hyperbolic lines would turn the poem into nonsense; therefore, the correct reading of a poem should go beyond the literal sense and interpret the text in its original context, searching for the meaning the author intended when he composed the poem. In this case, the poet's intended meaning is not and cannot be that every single subject of Zhou is dead, for the use of hyperbole is intended to emphasize the devastation that befell the state of Zhou, the dire situation that famine following drought was taking a heavy toll of the kingdom's population. Of course, Mencius is aware of the enormous gap between a past intention and present reading, and his solution to that problem lies in going back to, and reconstructing, the past. "Chanting the poems of the ancients and reading their books," says he, "how can we be ignorant of what the authors were as real people? Therefore, we study the age in which they lived. We should indeed go back in time to make friends with the ancients."[4] Given the powerful influence of Mencius in the Confucian tradition, the concept of poetry as directly arising from the poet's intention and realizing it in language dominates the mind of many Chinese critics, whose interpretive activity is

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[3] Mengzi zhengyi [The Works of Mencius with Exegesis], ed. Jiao Xun, in vol. 1 of Zhuzi jicheng. 5a.4; p. 377.

[4] Ibid., 5b.8; p. 428.

often determined teleologically as the recovery of authorial intention and methodologically as contextualization of the poem in past history, in a moment in the poet's biography or his lived experience.

Liu Xie, for example, devoted a whole chapter of his Literary Mind or the Carving of Dragon to the discussion of appreciative understanding, the quest for the ideal reader, zhiyin or "the one who knows the sound." The chapter begins with an emphatic note of difficulty: "How hard it is to know the sound! The sound is truly difficult to know, and the one who knows it is difficult to find. You may perhaps find but one in every thousand years!"[5] The main obstacles to true understanding, as Liu sees it, are the diversity of taste and intolerance of different opinions among people who "lavish praise on whatever is to their own taste but discard whatever they find alien and strange; each of them would stick to a narrow interpretation, never accommodating it to any change. This is indeed like `looking eastward but not seeing western walls.'"[6] Despite such tremendous diversity and difficulty, however, true understanding is still attainable, thanks to the correlation of poetry and authorial intention. Liu Xie writes:

> When his feelings are moved, the author of a literary work allows them to come out in words, and by opening up the literary text, the reader can enter

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[5] Wenxin diaolong zhushi [The Literary Mind or the Carving of Dragon], chap. 48, p. 517.

[6] Ibid., p. 518.

> those feelings, just as in tracing the waves back to their fountain-head, he can surely discover it, however secluded it may be. When an author lived in the remote past, one cannot see his face, but by viewing his writings, one can always see his mind. Therefore, what we should be concerned about is not that the text is too obscurely deep, but that our own knowledge and experiences are too shallow to penetrate its depth.[7]

For Liu Xie, understanding is clearly an attempt to re-live the experiences of the author, an effort aimed at "entering" the author's mind or his emotional state as inscribed in the work of literature. Liu is confident that such a goal of interpretation can be attained despite all the difficulties he so eloquently demonstrated. Even in music, which does not have a visible form, Liu argues, the musician's intention can be fully revealed to the one who is able to understand it, the one who knows the sound. Then, how can the author's intention or idea be hidden and lost when he has given it a graphic form with his writing brush, a permanently fixed form to which the reader can go back again and again? "Thus, the mind sees the idea as in a mirror, like the eye sees the form; to a sharp eye no form will remain undifferentiated, and to a quick mind no idea will fail to communicate."[8] For Liu Xie, a poem as artistic form arises from the author's ideas, experiences, and feelings; in order to understand a poem, one must go back from its form to the original conception, and engage oneself in a

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[7] Ibid.

[8] Ibid.

retrogression leading from the text to the pretextual intention, tracing words like waves back to their fountain-head, to the center of origin, which is the author's mind or heart.

The essential notion on which the edifice of the Chinese intentionalist hermeneutics stands, namely, the idea of zhiyin or "the one who knows the sound," comes from an ancient legend of the musician Bo Ya and his friend Zhong Ziqi. The legend has it that when Bo Ya plays a tune on his zither and intends to convey his thoughts about the Mount Tai, Zhong Ziqi is able to tell what he means, saying that "How wonderful you play the zither! The music sounds sublimely high as the Mount Tai." Then Bo Ya plays another tune and intends to express his ideas about great rivers, again Zhong understands perfectly, saying that "How wonderful you play the zither! It strikes one as the broad expanse of great rivers." When Zhong Ziqi died, Bo Ya "broke his zither, tore off the strings, and never played the zither again for the rest of his life, for he thought that the world no longer had anyone for whom he would play the music."[9] Obviously, perfect understanding can be achieved only in such legendary stories, and the point of this ancient story is precisely how rare such true understanding can ever be achieved. To find a zhiyin or true friend like Zhong Ziqi, however, has always been the dream of all Chinese poets. When Tao Qian asks

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[9] Lü Buwei (290-235 B. C.), Lüshi chunqiu [Lü's Spring and Autumn], juan 14, in vol. 6 of Zhuzi jicheng [Collection of Classics], p. 140.

with a sigh: "When no one is here to know the sound, / What use is there to strike a sad note?" (Tao ji, p. 123) he is evidently alluding to the story of Bo Ya and Zhong Ziqi, and yearning for true understanding. To be "the one who knows the sound" has always been the goal of Chinese critics who try, in their scholarly annotations, exegeses, and commentaries, to go back to the author's time and recover his original intention. As Qiu Zhao-ao, a seventeenth-century commentator of Du Fu's poems, says in defining his own project:

> Anyone who undertakes to annotate Du's poetry must repeatedly immerse himself in it to find out its final destination. Moreover, he must go over it line by line and word by word so that hopefully he may get what the author intended in his mind across the gap of hundreds or thousands of years, as though he were living in the author's world and seeing him in his face, emotionally affected by the same sorrows and quietly contemplating the same thoughts.[10]

This may well be a classic formulation of the intentionalist hermeneutics in the Chinese tradition. The commentator's repeated immersion in the work and his "line by line and word by word" negotiations of meaning vividly describe his mental activities as moving within limits of a hermeneutic circle of parts and whole, while his imaginary rendezvous with the author in a temporally remote world and his sympathetic re-experiencing of the author's emotions and thoughts disclose the aim of interpretation as a psychological identification

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[10] Preface to Du Shaoling ji xiangzhu [Annotated Edition of the Works of Du Fu], 4 vols. (Beijing: Wenxue guji, 1955), 1:2.

with the author and the reanimation of authorial intention as inscribed in a literary text.

In many ways, this Chinese notion of understanding as tracing the text back to the author's mind and entering his world has direct bearing on the issue of meaning and intention, which is often and vehemently debated in contemporary literary theory. E. D. Hirsch is probably the most eloquent and certainly the most famous of the modern advocates of an intentionalist hermeneutics. Facing what he calls the "Babel of interpretations" or the danger of radical relativism in both philosophical hermeneutics and literary criticism, Hirsch undertakes to establish a theoretical foundation for validating interpretations, a sort of "norm that can be universally compelling and generally sharable." And that norm, he claims, can be nothing other than "the author's meaning."[11] Of course, interpretations of a poem or a novel can, and often do, differ from one another, but Hirsch insists that all the differences are due to changes in the work's significance, not to any modification of its meaning which remains self-identical and reproducible, that is, always the same as the author intended at the moment of composition. "_Meaning_," he remarks, "is that which is represented by a text; it is what the author meant by his use of a particular sign sequence; it is what the signs represent. _Significance_, on the other hand, names a relation-

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[11] _Validity in Interpretation_ (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967), p. 25.

ship between that meaning and a person, or a conception, or a situation, or indeed anything imaginable."[12] The distinction between meaning and significance makes it possible for Hirsch to differentiate understanding, by which he means "a perception or construction of the author's verbal meaning, nothing more, nothing less," from interpretation or criticism, by which he refers to commentaries that "are concerned with significance as well as meaning."[13] Thus, the distinction provides the necessary theoretical ground for him to maintain the self-identity of authorial meaning in the face of all the changing situations and different interpretations because all the differences in interpretation can now be seen as simply different commentaries on the variable significance of a literary work, while the task of true understanding, according to Hirsch, should be reconstruction of the author's meaning, which is the only invariable factor that validates all interpretations.

If the Chinese intentionalist critic quoted above aims at a kind of psychological identification with the author, Hirsch is concerned first and foremost with the philological problem of textual meaning. He admits that no one can ever get inside the author's head and compare the meaning the author intends with the meaning one understands, but for him that is

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[12] Ibid., p. 8.

[13] Ibid., pp. 143, 136.

not the real issue: "The only question that can relevantly be at issue is whether the verbal meaning which an author intends is accessible to the interpreter of his text." In order to answer that question, he draws on Husserl's phenomenological concept of intentionality and asserts that "an unlimited number of different intentional acts can intend the same verbal meaning."[14] The circularity of this argument is obvious, for the statement that different people can have the same understanding of the same verbal meaning as the author originally intended is precisely what is at issue here. Strictly speaking, the indeterminacy of meaning is not a theoretical issue: it is the reality of practical criticism, as there are always different understandings and interpretations of the same text, the same linguistic structure, the "same verbal meaning." To declare that meaning remains self-identical and only significance changes does not really answer the question; it only posits an invariable meaning as a theoretical construct that transcends the practice of literary criticism, a sort of transcendental thing-in-itself that exists out there but cannot be known in real situations of interpretation.

Hirsch, of course, would be the last to argue for a hermeneutic agnosticism, since he is arguing precisely that the author's meaning not only exists as a thing-in-itself but is also knowable, and that meaning as a type can be shared by

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[14] Ibid., pp. 18, 38. Hirsch's italics.

different people at different places and times. Therefore, the only valid interpretation is the one that recovers the same type of meaning as the author intended. One example he gives is the interpretation of Hamlet. He rejects the psychoanalytic interpretation on the grounds that the Freudian reading does not belong to the type of meaning Shakespeare intended:

> In the example of Hamlet, we rejected the implication that Hamlet wished to sleep with his mother because we posited that such an implication did not belong to the type of meaning Shakespeare willed. . . . We rejected the implication because it was not, on our premises, the kind of trait that belonged to the type of character Shakespeare imagined.[15]

One may not agree with Freud when he insists that sublimation of the Oedipus complex is what Hamlet is all about, but to reject the psychoanalytic interpretation by appealing to the type of meaning Shakespeare could have willed only incurs an unnecessary burden of proof. There is no way to prove what was Shakespeare's intention. After all, what Hirsch recognizes as the Shakespearean type of meaning is "posited" by Hirsch himself as an interpretive "premise." It really belongs more to Hirsch than to Shakespeare, providing a frame of reference for Hirsch to piece together the details of the play into a coherent account. Theoretically, however, this type of meaning is merely different from, but not necessarily superior to, or more authentically Shakespearean than, the Freudian type which

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[15] Ibid., p. 124.

serves to guide the psychoanalytic critic in his interpretation. At a closer look, one may see that the author's type of meaning is in fact determined by the critic who has a certain preliminary understanding of the author and his world; therefore, the intentionalist hermeneutics can hardly be the kind of "objective criticism" as Hirsch claims it to be.

The same is true with the Chinese critic Qiu Zhao-ao. Though he claims to have Du Fu's own feelings and thoughts as guidance, he already has a very strong view of what kind of feelings and thoughts the poet Du Fu could have in the first place, for he reads Du's poetry completely in the Confucian perspective, seeing its great merits in transcending "mere letters" to become a powerful social commentary and a strong political commitment, with "not one single idea detached from the situation at Court, and not one single moment unconcerned with the sufferings of the people."[16] So ultimately, Qiu Zhao-ao's project is to "interpret Du in accordance with Confucius' and Mencius' comments on poetry," reading most of the poems as political allegories or topical pieces alluding to some event of the time.[17] Consequently, what he takes for Du Fu's intention turns out to be itself an outcome of interpretation, strongly influenced by, and contingent upon, the critic's social context, his ideology and personal beliefs.

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[16] Preface to Du Shaoling ji xiangzhu [Annotated Edition of the Works of Du Fu], 1:1.

[17] Ibid., p. 2.

For Hirsch, all the criteria used in verifying interpretations ultimately refer to a "psychological reconstruction." It seems that he is, after all, not so different from the Chinese intentionalist critic in tracing the text back to its origin in the author's mind. "The interpreter's primary task," says Hirsch, "is to reproduce in himself the author's `logic,' his attitudes, his cultural givens, in short, his world. Even though the process of verification is highly complex and difficult, the ultimate verificative principle is very simple--the imaginative reconstruction of the speaking subject."[18] In this respect, Hirsch's source is Dilthey, who emphasizes the importance of re-experiencing (Nacherleben) the author's original state of mind. Man differs from other creatures, Dilthey argues, in the ability to leave behind marks or traces of his life-experiences, his life-expressions (Lebensäußerungen), and the art of understanding implies an imaginative re-living of the author's experiences as he has permanently recorded in his work.[19] A general human nature provides the basis for communication among different individuals, thus the interpreter is able to understand the workings of an alien mind when he "projects his own sense of life into another historical milieu," entering a different state of mind, "thus making possible

[18] Validity in Interpretation, p. 242.

[19] See Dilthey, "Entwürfe zur Kritik der historischen Vernunft," Gesammelte Schriften, 17 vols. (Stuttgart: B. G. Teubner, 1914-74), 7:225.

within himself a re-experiencing of an alien form of life."[20] Hirsch has fully adopted these ideas in his theory; and as he declares himself, his "whole argument may be regarded as an attempt to ground some of Dilthey's hermeneutic principles in Husserl's epistemology and Saussure's linguistics."[21]

Dilthey's hermeneutics, however, cannot simply be reduced to a project for the psychological reconstruction of authorial intention. Rudolf Makkreel argues strongly against such a simplistic misunderstanding, calling our attention to Dilthey's own definition of the hermeneutic task as "to understand the author better than he understood himself."[22] Borrowed from Schleiermacher, this motto of Dilthey's hermeneutics clearly shows that "re-experiencing can no longer be conceived in terms of reproducing either the actual process of creation or the actual state of mind of the author," who is now "no longer a privileged interpreter of his work. This is the significance of Dilthey's claim that disinterestedness is a property of the lived experience of the creative artist."[23] Hirsch's use of Dilthey, therefore, goes against this very definition of the

[20] Dilthey, "The Rise of Hermeneutics," trans. Fredric Jameson, New Literary History 3 (Winter 1972): 243.

[21] Validity in Interpretation, p. 242, n.30.

[22] Dilthey, "The Rise of Hermeneutics," p. 244.

[23] Wilhelm Dilthey, Selected Works, vol. V, Poetry and Experience, ed. Rudolf Makkreel and Frithjof Rodi (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985); the Editors' Introduction to Volume V, pp. 19, 17.

hermeneutic task and "ignores Dilthey's own methodological ground rules which do not permit the validity of interpretation to depend on the reproduction of the meaning intended by an author."[24] Dilthey's hermeneutics aims at a higher level of understanding than the author's, therefore also higher than what Hirsch demands. Moreover, since the meaning of a work cannot be separated either from a sense of its original context or from its present significance, Makkreel also questions Hirsch's differentiation of meaning from significance, for "it is a mistake to think that we can first fix its meaning and then determine its historical significance as a mere application."[25]

Evidently, meaning changes just as much as significance. I have mentioned earlier that the indeterminacy of meaning is not so much a theoretical issue as the reality of interpretation because no interpretive method or strategy can lead two readers to exactly the same understanding of a literary work, and the meaning one understands cannot be divorced from one's own knowledge and cultivation, which are largely determined by one's historical conditions. This is also the point Gadamer makes when he argues that the hermeneutic circle, i. e., the fact that one always approaches a text with the anticipatory movement of fore-understanding, "is not a `methodological'

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[24] Rudolf A. Makkreel, Dilthey: Philosopher of the Human Studies (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), p. 417.

[25] Ibid., p. 418.

circle, but describes an ontological structural element in understanding" (TM, p. 261). That one's knowledge and ability to understand is already historically constituted is expressed by the concept of historicity, which fully recognizes the mutability of meaning in different times and situations. Yet, in order to maintain the invariability of meaning, Hirsch puts forward a directly opposite concept. He writes:

> We may set against this principle of historicity the principle of historicality, which asserts that a historical event, that is to say, an original communicative intent, can determine forever the permanent, unchanging features of meaning. The doctrine of historicality has a different scope from that of historicity. Gadamer's historicity implies that meaning must change over time; but historicality maintains that meaning can stay the same if we choose to regard meaning as a historically determined object.[26]

There is no question that an author's act to compose a literary work, like all other acts that happen in history, is a historical event with all its definite givens; it does not follow, however, that the meaning of his work is historically determinate. On the contrary, as Barbara Herrnstein Smith argues cogently, there is a crucial difference between natural and fictive discourses. A literary work as fictive utterance, that is, as a verbal structure that "was not `performed' and did not `occur' in the historical universe," is not itself a historical act or event, and its meaning or meanings are "his-

[26] "Meaning and Significance Reinterpreted," Critical Inquiry 11 (December 1984): 216.

torically indeterminate and therefore not even theoretically ascertainable on the basis of historical evidence." This is not to deny the meaning of a literary work its historical relevancy, but to recognize that its indeterminacy is itself historically determined by its nature as fictive utterance. "In other words," Barbara Smith continues, "to speak of the meanings of a fictive utterance as historically indeterminate is not to override--ignore, mistake, or betray--something that is there, but to acknowledge the fact that something is not there."[27] Perhaps we can see here the influence of a similar distinction Roman Ingarden made between real and represented objects in terms of determinacy and indeterminacy. Based on Husserl's epistemology, Ingarden observes that the essential characteristic of a real object is that it is "unequivocally, universally (i. e., in every respect) determined," while an intentional object as represented in language has an infinite number of "spots of indeterminacy," which "in principle cannot be entirely removed by any finite enrichment of the content of a nominal expression."[28] If a story begins with a descriptive sentence like "An old man was sitting at a table," though the represented table has its range of meaning, many of the

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[27] On the Margins of Discourse: The Relation of Literature to Language (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978), p. 138.

[28] The Literary Work of Art: An Investigation on the Borderlines of Ontology, Logic, and Theory of Literature, trans. George G. Grabowicz (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), pp. 246, 249.

determinate aspects of a real table: its shape, size, color, material, etc., says Ingarden, are "left quite unsaid and therefore--this being a purely intentional object--_not determined_."[29] Obviously, Ingarden's assimilation of Husserl is very different from that of Hirsch, and for Ingarden the meaning of a represented object is not at all permanently fixed by the author's intention or intentional act. Indeterminacy is a property, an ontological attribute of intentional objects, including all the objects and actions represented in a work of literature. That is to say, the indeterminacy of meaning in literature is not a theoretical hypothesis, but a fact every reader encounters. One of Ingarden's contributions to literary theory is precisely a seminal discussion of the schematic nature of a literary text, and of how an indeterminate meaning is enriched or concretized in the reading process in one way or another.

What we call meaning and recognize as indeterminate and changeable becomes, in Hirsch's terminology, "significance," while he reserves the term "meaning" for a hypothetically invariable element of the text, supposedly identical with the author's original intention. Hirsch seems to be aware of the hypothetical nature of this invariable meaning when he admits that his argument is "unabashedly and . . . necessarily theor-

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[29] Ibid., p. 249.

etical."[30] Obviously, theory here means something outside the practice of literary criticism and provides it with some kind of a guidance, a final point of reference, an Archimedean fulcrum in hermeneutics that will solve all the problems of conflicts in interpretation. In this connection, it is quite interesting to see yet another contention for intentionalist hermeneutics, put forward more recently by Steven Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels as an antitheoretical gesture, that goes one step further than Hirsch in asserting that not only does a text mean what the author intends, but meaning and authorial intention are always one and the same; therefore, to differentiate meaning from intention is already an unnecessary theoretical move that splits apart terms that are in fact inseparable. Their main point is "not that there _need_ be no gulf between intention and the meaning of its expression but that there _can_ be no gulf. Not only in serious literal speech but in _all_ speech what is intended and what is meant are identical."[31] Since meaning _is_ intention, so they argue, to choose intention over other things to get meaning is simply falling into the trap of theory. "But as soon as we recognize that there are no theoretical choices to be made," the two authors

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[30] _Validity in Interpretation_, p. x.

[31] "Against Theory," in _Against Theory: Literary Studies and the New Pragmatism_, ed. W. J. T. Mitchell (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1985), p. 17.

maintain, "then the point of theory vanishes. Theory loses."[32] Their essay is provocatively entitled "Against Theory," and they seem to argue that once theory stops, practical criticism will happily reach the correct understanding of the meaning of literature, which has always been the same as the author's intention. Not surprisingly, their essay has incited many to rise in defence of theory, as the articles collected in a special Critical Inquiry book clearly show. It is therefore not necessary to advance yet another theoretical argument against such an antitheoretical, "pragmatist argument." It may be more useful to look instead at practical criticism, at some exemplary cases to see how a literary text is interpreted differently by critics who all appeal to the author's intention as guidance for their interpretation.

2. THE TESTIMONY OF PRAXIS

Among the critics who contributed to the collection of essays written in response to Knapp and Michaels' intentionalist argument, Hershel Parker contends from a textual scholar's practical point of view that a literary text is not an immutable arrangement of words, and that its meaning is much more complicated than Hirsch, Knapp and Michaels have taken it to be. Parker cites as evidence alterations in the novels by

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[32] Ibid., p. 18.

Herman Melville, Mark Twain, Stephen Crane, Theodore Dreiser, Norman Mailer and others to show that sometimes, because of authorial revision or editorial patching, a passage in a text will embody "two different and contradictory authorial intentions rather than one," and that "nonmeanings, partially authorial meanings, and inadvertent, intentionless meanings coexist in standard literary texts with genuine authorial meanings."[33] Such empirical evidence shows that a text does not always mean what its author intends, but the intentionalist critic might argue that the very purpose of textual criticism, the effort to establish a good, "authoritative" edition of a literary text, is precisely to recover authorial intention. What the intentionalist critic tends to ignore, however, is the fact that authorial intention as established in textual criticism is itself an outcome of interpretation.

A case in point is the difference of editorial opinion as seen in the Variorum edition of Milton's poetry, which Stanley Fish discusses in great detail to reveal the basic constitutive nature of interpretation. In commenting on the last two lines of Milton's twentieth sonnet--"He who of those delights can judge, and spare / To interpose them oft, is not unwise"--the two editors, A. S. P. Woodhouse and Douglas Bush, cannot agree on the exact meaning of "spare": whether it means "leave time for" or "refrain from." Consequently, two differ-

[33] "Lost Authority: Non-sense, Skewed Meanings, and Intentionless Meanings," Against Theory, pp. 76, 78.

ent readings are proposed. In one reading, Milton appears to recommend to the reader "those delights"--he who can leave time for them is not unwise, but in the other reading, the poet is admonishing the reader against indulgence in such delights--he who knows when to refrain from them is not unwise. Proponents of the two readings all appeal to formal features of the text and Milton's "known attitudes" to support a particular interpretation, but the fact that they can all do so to promote mutually exclusive readings suggests that what is considered as verification is in fact interpretation shaped by the interpreter's preliminary understanding. From the same evidence, Woodhouse and Bush come to exactly the opposite conclusions; therefore "evidence brought to bear in the course of formalist analyses," as Fish remarks, "will always point in as many directions as there are interpreters; that is, not only will it prove something, it will prove anything."[34] Both formal features and intention are created by interpretation: "rather than intention and its formal realization producing interpretation (the 'normal' picture), interpretation creates intention and its formal realization by creating the conditions in which it becomes possible to pick them out." The circularity of the verification process is quite obvious: "I 'saw' what my interpretive principles permitted or directed

[34] Stanley Fish, "Interpreting the Variorum," Is There a Text in This Class?: The Authority of Interpretive Communities (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1980), p. 150.

me to see, and then I turned around and attributed what I had 'seen' to a text and an intention."[35] Another example Fish discusses is Milton's L'Allegro, lines 45-6: "Then to come in spite of sorrow, / And at my window bid good-morrow."[36] The question here is: Who comes to the window? Critics have debated on the appropriate answer and have recommended many candidates: Mirth, the Lark, the Cheerful Man, Dawn, etc. The pattern of verification is again a hermeneutic circle. As Fish notes:

> (1) The proponent of each reading makes concessions, usually by acknowledging that there *is* evidence for the readings he opposes.
> (2) Each critic is able to point to details which do in fact support his position.
> (3) But in order fully to support his respective position every one of the critics is moved to make *sense* of the lines by supplying connections more firm and delimiting than the connections available in the text.
> (4) This making of sense always involves an attempt to arrange the images and events of the passage into a sequence of logical action.[37]

In other words, each critic is able to support his reading of the whole passage by pointing to the logical coherence of the details; yet he is able to arrange the details in a coherent structure only because he already has some preliminary under-

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[35] Ibid., p. 163.

[36] John Milton, "L'Allegro," *Complete Poems and Major Prose*, ed. Merritt Y. Hughes (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1957), p. 69.

[37] "*What It's Like To Read* L'Allegro *and* Il Penseroso," ibid., p. 116.

standing of what the whole passage is about. Assumption of the meaning of the whole text forms the perspective which enables the critic to see the details in a certain sequence; in fact, this circularity of understanding appears in almost all controversies on textual cruxes.

In Chinese literature, one of the most ambiguous poems that seems to invite critical controversy is a famous one by the late Tang poet Li Shangyin (813?-58). The poem is conventionally referred to as Jin se [The Patterned Lute] by simply using the first two characters of the first line as its title. Jin or brocade is used here as an adjective, meaning "richly adorned," "embellished," or "ornamented," and se is a musical instrument, similar to a lute or zither. The title of a poem, like that of program music, usually provides an important clue to the theme or content of its text. In this case, then, such a clue is missing, and the whole text becomes a puzzling maze of elegant words and phrases, a labyrinth of alluring yet evasive imagery. The poem is really untranslatable, but in order to present the different readings that have all tried to make sense of it by making connections in a hermeneutic circle, I must give a relatively literal translation. Here, then, is this famous poetic enigma:

> The patterned lute, for no reason, has fifty strings;
> Each string, each fret, recalls the prime years.
> Zhuangzi in his morning dream was puzzled
> by the butterfly;
> Emperor Wang entrusted to the cuckoo
> his spring passion;
> Over the vast sea the moon shines, pearls

are shedding tears;
On Blue Fields the sun warms, a smoke
rises from the jade.
This mood might have been a thing to be remembered;
But even then, it was already vague and lost.[38]

The poem typically makes a number of philosophical and literary allusions, some less obvious than others. Line 3 refers to a famous passage of the Zhuangzi in which the philosopher (referred to as Zhuang Zhou) writes about a strange dream he once had that reveals his idea of the transformation and equality of all things in their initial, undifferentiated condition. The dream is a fascinating fable of identity, or rather, of the illusion of identity, as it puts into question the very boundary between dream and reality, Self and Other, being and becoming:

> Once Zhuang Zhou dreamed of himself being a butterfly; he was really a butterfly fluttering around, happy and comfortable, knowing not that he was Zhou. After a while, he woke up, and he was surprisingly Zhuang Zhou himself. It is not clear whether it was Zhou who had dreamed of being a butterfly or it was the butterfly who had dreamed of being Zhou. Yet there must be differentiation between Zhou and the butterfly, and this is called the transformation of things (Z, i, pp. 53-4).

This dream and its dreamy uncertainty have always caught the poets' imagination. As Jorge Luis Borges, a lover of Eastern poetry and mysticism, comments insightfully: "There is poetry in that brief text. The choice of the butterfly is felicitous,

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[38] Li Shangyin xuanji [Selected Works of Li Shangyin], ed. Zhou Zhenfu (Shanghai: Shanghai guji, 1986), p. 1.

since the butterfly has a tenuous quality that is fitting for the stuff of dreams."[39] The next line in Li Shangyin's poem, however, turns to a totally unrelated story about the legendary Emperor Wang of Shu. According to a version of the legend, Emperor Wang debauched his prime minister's wife and felt ashamed of himself. He abdicated the state to his minister and went into self-imposed exile. When he died, his spirit was transformed into a cuckoo. Lines 3 and 4 may thus touch on a common theme of transformation. Line 5 about pearls shedding tears seems a variation on an old legend about the mermaids at sea that when they weep, their tears would become shining pearls while falling down their cheeks. The Blue Fields in line 6 is a mountain famous for its fine jade, and the entire line may allude to a remark made by the poet Dai Shulun (732-89) that the scene represented in poetry is a sort of metaphorical mirage which, like the smoke rising from fine jade when the sun warms up the Blue Fields, can only be seen from afar but cannot be put in front of one's eyes.

Now with the necessary supply of information about allusions, the interpreter is faced with the task of making sense of the whole poem by linking together the various lines and images. But where is the starting point? Where should he begin to make connections and put the disparate elements together

[39] Twenty-Four Conversations with Borges, Including a Selection of Poems, trans. Nicomedes Suárez Araúz et al. (Housatonic, Mass.: Lascaux, 1984), p. 39.

in an intelligible shape? Evidently, he must somehow have an intelligible shape in his mind before he can put the images and allusions in that frame of intelligibility; that is to say, he must have some idea of what the poem as a whole is about before he can make sense of its images and allusions. As we shall see, Chinese commentators of Li Shangyin's poem all begin their interpretation by making a guess at the idea of the whole poem in terms of the poet's original intention, and by locating it in the map of poetic types or genres, which will then guide the commentators in correlating all the lines, images, and their associations. A generic conception of the literary work is where interpretation starts. "All understanding of verbal meaning," as Hirsch observes, "is necessarily genre-bound."[40] For Hirsch, the type of poetry should be the type the author intends, but practical criticism does not always work out that way. The Chinese commentators would be most willing to accept Hirsch's view, and they indeed tried to form a generic conception with regard to authorial intention, but the outcome of their very different readings is nonetheless a testimony to the indeterminacy of meaning and the poem's susceptibility of different interpretations.

Of the many different but more or less plausible readings of this poem, I choose just a few to demonstrate how all the commentaries work in a hermeneutic circle. One commentator,

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[40] Validity in Interpretation, p. 76.

Zhu Yizun (1629-1709), begins his interpretation by relating the poem to a particular moment in Li Shangyin's biography, and decides that this is an elegy the poet wrote in memory of his deceased wife:

> The lute originally has twenty-five strings, which are now broken into fifty; "for no reason" emphasizes the breaking of strings [which is an euphemistic expression for the death of one's wife]. "Each string, each fret," followed by "recalls the prime years," suggest that she died at the age of twenty five. The butterfly and the cuckoo refer to her transformation into other forms of life. The pearls are shedding tears for her, and the smoke of fine jade implies her interment, as the familiar saying goes, "burying her fragrance and entombing the fine jade."[41]

Zhu Yizun attempts to read the poem in relation to the poet's life experience, and gives a coherent explanation of all the images and their associations within that frame of reference. Insofar as it connects the various textual elements of the poem, his interpretation is valid, persuasive, and probably the most influential of all the traditional readings. But it does not prevent other critics from making totally different interpretations of the same poem. He Zhuo (1661-1722), for example, understands the poem and its images altogether differently:

> This piece expresses the poet's self-pity in the style of Qu Yuan who writes about his own sorrow allegorically as a lady's lament over her fading

[41] This and the other commentaries discussed below, unless otherwise indicated, are all quoted in Zhou Zhenfu's notes to the "Patterned Lute" in Li Shangyin xuanji [Selected Works of Li Shangyin], pp. 2-5.

> beauty. The line about Zhuangzi implies that all has been an empty dream, and the line about Emperor Wang entertains some hope for the next cycle of life. The vast sea and the Blue Fields indicate his being buried in obscurity without due recognition, while the shining moon and the warm sun suggest that he is all the more unfortunate as being the only one not appreciated in a time of fair opportunities.

Evidently, He Zhuo's generic conception of the poem is totally different from that of Zhu Yizun, and that conception lets him see things differently and make different connections. Given the fact that self-pity and lament over one's obscurity in the form of a social or political allegory are indeed quite common in Chinese poetry, this interpretation is persuasive in its own way. For Zhu Yizun, the poem is about Li Shangyin's deceased wife, but He Zhuo reads it as the poet's lament over his own fate; their working assumptions differ fundamentally in terms of gender as well as genre, and there is nothing in the text that would either support or reject such different assumptions.

In yet another reading, a totally different view arises from yet another generic conception. The poet Huang Tingjian (1045-1105) recalls that his friend, the great poet Su Shi, told him that Li Shangyin's poem "has its source in The Record of Music, Past and Present, where it is said that the patterned lute is an instrument with fifty strings and the same number of frets. Its sound can evoke the feelings of comfort, sorrow, serenity, and harmony." Huang Tingjian adds that "the line about Zhuangzi in Li's poem indeed suggests comfort; that

of Emperor Wang, sorrow; pearls shedding tears in the moonlit sea, serenity; and smoke rising from fine jade on the Blue Fields, harmony."[42] Such a reading takes the four lines in the middle of the poem as representing four different kinds of mood expressed in music, and figuratively also four kinds of mood or emotion expressed in poetry. Therefore, when read literally, the poem is about music, but metaphorically it is about poetry itself. Such an interpretation seems to adumbrate what Jonathan Culler proposes as one of the conventions or expectations for making sense of "obscure or minimal poems," namely, "the rule that poems are significant if they can be read as reflections on or explorations of the problems of poetry itself."[43] This is also the point Qian Zhongshu makes in his reading of this enigmatic poem. In an earlier edition of Li Shangyin's poetry, the "Patterned Lute" is put at the beginning of his collected works, and may thus be understood as the poet's comment on his own writing, a kind of poetic preface to the collection. Qian Zhongshu takes this point, which was noticed by an earlier critic, and further develops it. Strikingly modern and yet grounded in solid traditional scholarship, his interpretation certainly merits to be quoted in full, but as it contains many references and allusions that

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[42] Quoted in Cai Zhengsun (fl. 1279), Shilin guangji [In the Woods of Poetry] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1982), p. 100.

[43] Structural Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics and the Study of Literature (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975), p. 177.

presuppose a certain amount of specific knowledge of Chinese literature and criticism, I have omitted some lines and translated only the main argument:

> The poet can make "patterned lute" as well as "jade zither" into metaphors for poetry. Du Fu does this in his own first poem of the Xi ge [Western Tower] group: "The red seal tinsel resembles a recluse's satin cap; / New poems have the sound of a fine jade zither." The patterned lute and the jade zither are indeed comparable... When the poet sees the fifty strings of the lute, he is made aware of his aging years, that he is near fifty... The first two lines of Li's poem suggest that his prime years are gone but his works remain, that the energy and effort of a life time, all his joys and sorrows, are all presented here, in tunes either happy or sad, serene or harmonious... Lines 3 and 4 speak of his method of making poetry. Whatever he has thought or felt is expressed in metaphors and images, as Zhuangzi's pleasure is seen in the flying butterfly, or Emperor Wang's remorse is embodied in the crying cuckoo: all are figuratively put but never said directly. Meaning is "entrusted" because it is manifest in things other than itself, and one is likely to be "puzzled" because the intention is hidden in metaphorical language... Lines 5 and 6 speak of his poetic style or the world his poetry creates... Instead of "pearls are tears," he says "pearls are shedding tears," suggesting that what have turned into pearls are still warm as tears, valuable as treasure but still quivering with human bitterness... The same is true with the smoke from warm jade, which is not hard and cold as ordinary jade. This implies that even though his poems are highly refined, they have real life and genuine emotions, totally different from the kind of overwrought and lifeless poetry that fails not because it does not shine like pearls or jade, but because its tears are already dry and its smoke has vanished. Hofmannsthal describes Heine's poems as brighter and more enduring than pearls, but with light and moisture as living things (unverweslicher als Perlen / Und leuchtender, zuweilen ein Gebild: / Das traget am lebendigen Leib, und nie / Verliert es seinen innern feuchten Glanz ["Zu Heinrich Heines Gedächtnis"]). Isn't this pearls shedding tears?... Lines 7 and 8 conclude the poem in response to the first two lines. Looking back, the poet is filled with sorrow; recalling the time of past pleasure,

> he has a strong sense of the mutability of things and the passing of time, feeling sad that one so easily wakes up from a beautiful dream, that every feast must have an end. He realizes that whatever pleasure he once had, "even then, it was already vague and lost."[44]

Qian Zhongshu's interpretation takes more details into consideration than any of the others quoted above and makes a most convincing argument. Following his argument and accepting the assumption that Li Shangyin's poem is indeed about poetry itself, the last couplet--"This mood might have been a thing to be remembered; / But even then, it was already vague and lost,"--seems to suggest that whatever the poet intends to preserve in his work, whatever mood he wants to remember by enshrining it in a fixed form, is already vague in its origin and even more so in verbal representation. If this is indeed Li Shangyin's poetic preface to his own works, it gives us a fairly good indication of the kind of poetry he writes: poetry that is highly personal, suggestive, atmospheric, full of all kinds of associations and possibilities, guiding its readers to a world of intense beauty and pleasure, where every word, every image speaks of itself and at the same time of something else. This would be the kind of poetry advocated in symbolist poetics, the ideal poetry Paul Verlaine describes as "<u>la chanson grise / Où l'Indécis au Précis se joint</u>" [the tipsy song

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[44] Qian Zhongshu, <u>Tan yi lu</u> [Discourses on Art], enlarged ed., pp. 435-38. Also quoted in Zhou Zhenfu's notes, see <u>Li Shangyin xuanji</u> [Selected Works], pp. 2-4.

/ where the Undefined and Exact combine].[45] In the long history of classical Chinese literature, Li Shangyin is certainly the most suggestive of all Chinese poets.

In reading Li Shangyin's "Patterned Lute" as a poem about poems, we are turning all its difficulties in structure and imagery into characteristics of the poetic language itself. That is to say, the very difficulties in interpretation become hermeneutically significant as enactments of the function of symbolic representation or, as Culler puts it, "as reflections on or explorations of the problems of poetry itself." Such an interpretation is especially engaging and persuasive in modern times when problems of language and representation come to occupy an essential place in our thinking about literature, but we must admit that the other, more traditional interpretations mentioned above also have their persuasive power insofar as they offer a coherent account of the whole poem and its textual elements with regard to a different set of problems and concerns. Of the various interpretations, we may prefer one to the rest, or privilege one over the others, as we all have our own judgment and preference, but it is impossible to claim that one interpretation has the absolute validity while all the others are invalid or simply wrong, so long as the other interpretations can make connections of the various images and allusions, and account for the whole text in one

[45] Verlaine, Art poétique, in French Symbolist Poetry, trans. MacIntyre, p. 34.

way or another. The appeal of a particular interpretation is to a great extent a matter of individual taste and personal choice shaped or determined by social and aesthetic norms of the time rather than a calculated conclusion reached by following objective laws or based on factual evidence. As the controversy on the "Patterned Lute" clearly shows, all interpretations work in a hermeneutic circle of whole and parts, of the generic assumption and explication of textual elements, and the circularity of interpretation puts into question any claim of absolute validity. "Theoretically," as Dilthey remarks, "we here reach the limits of all exegesis, which is able to realize its task only up to a certain point. For all understanding remains partial and can never be terminated. *Individuum est ineffabile*."[46] Interpretation of the same text changes as the social and aesthetic norms change in time, and this temporal distance between past and present understanding has tremendous significance in hermeneutics. If Schleiermacher claims that present understanding is superior to the original production on the grounds that conscious knowledge places the interpreter on a higher level than the author as unconscious genius, Gadamer sees the better position of the interpreter mainly in the light of the positive significance of temporal distance. As the difference between past and present understanding has to do with temporal distance rather than any

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[46] Dilthey, "The Rise of Hermeneutics," p. 243.

intrinsic value, however, it may not be appropriate to think of present understanding in terms of superiority. In fact, as Gadamer argues, understanding is not superior to past production "neither in the sense of superior knowledge of the subject because of clearer ideas, nor in the sense of fundamental superiority that the conscious has over the unconscious nature of creation. It is enough to say that we understand in a different way, if we understand at all" (TM, p. 264). It is thus important to know how differences in understanding come to exist. Gadamer's philosophical writing has provided an answer in terms of temporal distance as a hermeneutically productive element in understanding, and it remains the task of literary hermeneutics to look into the matter in terms of both the production and the reception of a literary work, the structuring of a text and its subsequent realizations.

3. TEXTUAL SCHEMA AND INDETERMINACY

In his learned and widely influential book Mimesis, which investigates the various ways of representation of reality in Western literature from antiquity to the twentieth century, Erich Auerbach begins his discussion of this enormous subject with a stylistic contrast between the Homeric epics and biblical narrative, the two great fountain-heads of Western literature and culture. Every object, every episode in Homer is fully externalized, meticulously described to the last detail,

realistically presented, as it were, to the reader's eye. In Homer's narrative, Auerbach observes, "a continuous rhythmic procession of phenomena passes by, and never is there a form left fragmentary or half-illuminated, never a lacuna, never a gap, never a glimpse of unplumbed depths," for "the Homeric style knows only a foreground, only a uniformly illuminated, uniformly objective present."[47] In sharp contrast to such a style, the text in the Old Testament appears extremely concise and austerely sketchy. It supplies the reader with only enough information to go on with the minimal narrative, leaving all else in obscurity: "time and place are undefined and call for interpretation; thoughts and feeling remain unexpressed, and only suggested by the silence and the fragmentary speeches; the whole, permeated with the most unrelieved suspense and directed toward a single goal (and to that extent far more of a unity), remains mysterious and `fraught with background.'"[48] In Auerbach's view, Homer seems self-evident and leaves no gap whatever for interpreters to fill in, but the obscurity of the Old Testament gives rise, of necessity, to endless exegeses. Given what we have so far discussed of the nature of language with regard to symbolist poetics and the Chinese emphasis on suggestiveness as the most salient feature of poetry, it is

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[47] Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953), pp. 6-7.

[48] Ibid., pp. 11-2.

clear that the style of the Homeric epics is more akin to the metonymic discourse of artistic prose, as it does lead to the development of prose fiction in Western literature, while the biblical style has a much greater structural resemblance and rhetorical affinity to the metaphorical discourse of poetry.

The very obscurity of biblical narrative, which requires interpretation and may seem undesirable when measured with the yardstick of Homeric perspicuity, becomes a virtue rather than a defect when St. Augustine claims it to be the welcome veil over divine truth, and relates it with aesthetic pleasure. As Bernard Huppé notes: "Aesthetic pleasure derives, according to Augustine, from the very discovery of hidden meanings; the quality of the pleasure has a direct relation to the difficulty of the ambiguities to be resolved."[49] Augustine admits that many things in the Old Testament are obscured by tropes, but "the more these things seem to be obscured by figurative words, the sweeter they become when they are explained."[50] Such an argument may have been motivated by Augustine's religious faith in the superiority of the Bible to pagan literature, but for him as for the medieval sensibility under his

[49] Doctrine and Poetry: Augustine's Influence on Old English Poetry (New York: State University of New York Press, 1959), p. 24.

[50] St. Augustine, On Christian Doctrine, trans. D. W. Robertson (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1958), 4.7.15, pp. 128-9. See also ibid., 2.6.8, p. 38: "no one doubts that things are perceived more readily through similitudes and that what is sought with difficulty is discovered with more pleasure."

dominating influence, beauty and aesthetic pleasure are inseparable from the contemplation of a deeper meaning in all things, and the greater the challenge is to interpret things where interpretation seems difficult, the more satisfactory it will become when ingenious connections are made which make sense in a symbolic interpretation. For the medieval mind, symbolic interpretation was the characteristic way of thinking. "The formation of symbols was artistic," as Umberto Eco notes. "To decipher them was to experience them aesthetically. It was a type of aesthetic expression in which the Medievals took great pleasure in deciphering puzzles, in spotting the daring analogy, in feeling that they were involved in adventure and discovery."[51] Not only the Bible, but also works of pagan literature were read for deeper meanings, and when texts of all kinds were regarded as symbols and allegories, textual obscurity that challenged the mind was inevitably privileged as the source of intellectual as well as aesthetic pleasure. Both the Bible and classical literature suggested to the medieval writer, says Huppé, "that the enigmatic, the difficult, the ambiguous, were part of the grand style of serious literature. The Christian understanding of the Bible and of pagan literature made almost inevitable the development of a theory

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[51] Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages, trans. Hugh Bredin (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), p. 55.

that serious poetry should be allusive, enigmatic, periphrastic."[52]

In this connection, we may recall Mallarmé's statement that art, like religion, should envelop itself in mystery if it wants to retain its sacredness. Paul Valéry also claims that "What is clear and comprehensible and corresponds to an exact idea never produces an impression of the divine"; and that "All that's `noble,' lofty, and heroic is founded on obscurity."[53] Augustine's preference for stylistic obscurity has indeed many echoes along the tunnel of history.[54] In his pioneer work on the theory of the avant-garde, Renato Poggioli sees the deliberate obscurity in much of modern poetry as a gesture of antagonism to social and aesthetic norms as well as a device to achieve a new effect in language. Obscurity is the poet's "necessary reaction to the flat, opaque, and prosaic nature of our public speech, where the practical end of quantitative communication spoils the quality of expressive means."[55] This idea of obscurity or stylistic difficulty as a

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[52] Doctrine and Poetry, p. 30.

[53] Paul Valéry, The Collected Works of Paul Valéry, ed. Jackson Mathews, 15 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1956-75), 14:505, 359.

[54] Besides Old English poetry, Huppé also sees Isidore of Seville, Vergil of Toulouse, Bede, Alcuin, Rabanus, and Scotus Erigena as influenced by Augustine's theory of literature. See Doctrine and Poetry, pp. 28-63.

[55] Renato Poggioli, The Theory of the Avant-Garde, trans. Gerald Fitzgerald (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1968), p. 37.

device to call attention to the means of expression itself obviously resembles the critical notion of poetic language, or the poetic function of language, as developed by the Russian formalists, and Poggioli himself points out the close ties that bound Russian formalism and the avant-garde movement together.[56] From Victor Shklovsky's concept of "defamiliarization," the idea that "art is to make objects `unfamiliar,' to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception," to Jan Mukarovsky's concept of "deautomatization," the notion of poetic language as "foregrounding" of the utterance, "the intentional violation of the norm of the standard," modern literary theory tends to define the function of poetic language as distinct from that of daily speech, and to identify the ambiguous, the difficult, and the enigmatic as characteristic of poetic language.[57] Shklovsky's concept of "defamiliarization," as Jurij Striedter observes, "already contained hints pointing further," that is, pointing to the Czech structuralist notion of the work of art as "a sign in an aesthetic function," thus marking the first phase of the evolutionary series from Russian formalism to Czech struc-

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[56] See ibid., pp. 146-7.

[57] Shklovsky, "Art as Technique," in Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays, trans. L. T. Lemon and M. J. Reis (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), p. 12. Jan Mukarovsky, "Standard Language and Poetic Language," in A Prague School Reader on Esthetics, Literary Structure, and Style, trans. Paul L. Garvin (Washington, D. C.: Georgetown University Press, 1964), p. 18.

turalism.[58] Of course, it is not just the modern avant-garde poets who defamiliarize representation of objects and events. Writing in opposition to the hackneyed poetic diction of neo-classicism, the romantic poets already advocated the same idea and used the same device. Wordsworth warns those readers who have been "accustomed to the gaudiness and inane phraseology of many modern writers" that they will, should they read his poetry with the same kind of expectations, "no doubt, frequently have to struggle with feelings of strangeness and awkwardness."[59] The principle object in writing his poems, he continues, is to adopt in poetry the "language really used by men," and to add a certain coloring of imagination, "whereby ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual way."[60] Shelley also has a similar idea that remarkably anticipates the concept of defamiliarization. Poetry, Shelley observes, "awakens and enlarges the mind itself by rendering it the receptacle of a thousand unapprehended combinations of thought. Poetry lifts the veil from the hidden beauty of the world, and makes familiar objects be as if they were not fam-

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[58] Literary Structure, Evolution, and Value: Russian Formalism and Czech Structuralism Reconsidered (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989), pp. 88, 89.

[59] "Preface to Lyrical Ballads (1802)," in The Oxford Authors: William Wordsworth, ed. Stephen Gill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 596.

[60] Ibid., p. 597.

iliar."[61] The poets themselves, however, never fully explored the theoretical implications of this concept of defamiliarization in the same manner as the Russian formalists did later. More importantly, as Striedter argues, "it was not sufficient to point up general defamiliarizing devices and to erect a theory of literature on them. What also had to be shown was why, under different conditions, the same devices achieve different effects." That, of course, is precisely the direction the Czech structuralists took in extending the formalist concept of defamiliarization "to the identification of these devices as factors of construction, and thereby to the description of concrete work structures as the organization of elements and devices in specific functions."[62]

The defamiliarized text, namely, the obscure, difficult text, forces the reader to attend to the linguistic signs themselves and perceive things represented in language with a new and awakened sensibility. It is not only in poetry but also in prose fiction that modern literary theory privileges such stylistic difficulty. Roland Barthes's distinction, in S/Z, between the "readerly" and the "writerly" texts, i. e., the classical and the avant-garde, is a well-known example we need not go into detail here. The text he favors, the kind of

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[61] A Defence of Poetry, in Shelley's Critical Prose, p. 12.

[62] Striedter, Literary Structure, Evolution, and Value, p. 96.

text that gives the reader an intense, orgasmic pleasure or bliss (jouissance), is the more difficult type of text, "the untenable text, the impossible text."[63] It is the type of text that leaves a lot of things unexplained and unexpressed, or, to borrow Auerbach's words, the text that is "fraught with background." Barthes speaks of the aesthetics of reading figuratively in terms of an erotics of reading, which is for him the only possible way to speak of the unspeakable experience of bliss. "Is not the most erotic portion of a body where the garment gapes?" he asks; "it is intermittence, as psychoanalysis has so rightly stated, which is erotic: the intermittence of skin flashing between two articles of clothing . . . it is this flash itself which seduces, or rather: the staging of an appearance-as-disappearance."[64] The phrase he chooses to characterize textuality, "appearance-as-disappearance," is truly felicitous because language at once conceals and reveals, with endless joy and pleasure promised in the gaps and between the lines, forever beckoning to the reader and his imagination. Of course, the seductive intermittence exists not just in avant-garde texts but in all texts, and interestingly in S/Z, Barthes selects a classical text, Balzac's very "readerly" story, Sarrasine, to be the object for his semiotic analysis.

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[63] R. Barthes, The Pleasure of the Text, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975), p. 22.

[64] Ibid., pp. 9-10.

Is then the ultimate classical text, the text of Homer's epics written in that fully externalized style, altogether resistent to interpretation? "Homer can be analyzed," says Auerbach assuredly, "but he cannot be interpreted. Later allegorizing trends have tried their arts of interpretation upon him, but to no avail. He resists any such treatment; the interpretations are forced and foreign, they do not crystallize into a unified doctrine."[65] Ironically, however, allegoresis, the mode of interpretation that finds deeper meanings where such meanings are not immediately available, first arose in the interpretation of Homer. It was then transferred to the reading of the Old Testament, and gradually became the basis of all textual interpretation in the Middle Ages.[66] One may of course question the validity of allegorical interpretation of Homer, but the possibility of interpretation is beyond question. Let us recall Roman Ingarden's concept of the literary work as a multi-layered structure. According to Ingarden, insofar as they attempt to represent an object or event in language, all literary texts are stratified or schematic, with an indefinite number of spots of indeterminacy which are subsequently concretized in the reading process. In this sense, Homer's epics are also schematic, and no matter how uniformly

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[65] Mimesis, pp. 13-4.

[66] See Ernst Robert Curtius on "Homer and Allegory," in European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), pp. 203-7.

illuminated they may be, they are destitute neither of spots of indeterminacy nor of what Barthes calls seductive intermittence. For example, Helen, the most beautiful woman in all classical literature, is barely portrayed in Homer's Iliad. In Book III, when "white-armed Helen" goes to the wall of Troy to see the duel between Menelaus and Paris, Homer does not pause to give a detailed description of Helen as he later does the magnificent shield Hephaestus makes for Achilles in Book XVIII. The great beauty of Helen is not "seen" by the reader, but "overheard" in the reactions of the Trojan Elders. "Who on earth," the Trojans ask one another in a low voice when they see Helen coming to the tower, "could blame the Trojan and Achaean men-at-arms for suffering so long for such a woman's sake?"[67] Not a single word in the Homeric text describes her face or figure, but a strong sense of Helen's immortal beauty is conveyed to the reader by the awed whispers of the Trojan Elders. We may even say that precisely this lack of description, this "appearance-as-disappearance," has made Helen what she is, for properly framed in elaborate descriptions of war and whispering admiration, her beauty, which is the cause of these all, remains in the background and becomes infinitely more vivid and more impressive than any description could be,

[67] The Iliad, trans. E. V. Rieu (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1960), p. 68. Analogous to this are Christopher Marlowe's famous lines: "Was this the face that launch'd a thousand ships, / And burnt the topless towers of Ilium?" (Doctor Faustus, V.i.97).

once it is concretized and made alive in the reader's imagination. That is to say, textual schema and indeterminacy do not just inhabit the more obscure type of texts, as both types Auerbach discussed, the Homeric and the biblical, the illuminated and the obscure, are inevitably schematic in structure. Evidently, structural schema is a feature of textuality shared by all works of literature. In his discussion of aesthetic experience as anticipatory imagination, Hans Robert Jauss mentions as examples "the _amor de lonh_, the `love from afar' which inspires Jaufre Rudel to become the poet of that purest longing which finds its fulfillment in nonfulfillment," and Don Quixote whose "love for Dulcinea remains perfect because he never finds her," etc.[68] By not fulfilling the reader's expectations, the text remains powerfully alluring, offering an opportunity for the reader to bring his or her imagination into full play.

An ancient Chinese song, _Moshang sang_ or "The Mulberry Trees on the Road," uses a similar device as Homer used to suggest the beauty of a young lady, Luofu of Qin. The most effective lines of the poem speak of her beauty without describing her features. The poetic eye turns, as it were, to those around her and scans their reactions:

> When the passers-by see her, they put down
> carrying-poles and stroke their beard.

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[68] _Aesthetic Experience and Literary Hermeneutics_, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), p. 9.

The young man sees her,
and takes off his hat.
The ploughman forgets his plough;
the spadesman forgets his spade.
Returning home marital strife ensues,
all for a glimpse at Luofu the fair.[69]

Unlike the Trojan war, the "marital strife" in this poem is not a protracted ten-year struggle, but its origin, like that of the Trojan war, remains in the background, and is revealed to the reader not through others' eyes but through the outcome of what others see in their eyes. This double distancing reflection seems to put the object of seeing in obscurity, but by the same token, it serves to activate the reader's imagination and to incite his desire for what is absent. The use of this device is of course not limited to speaking of angelic beauty, it is rather the most effective way to overcome the inadequacy of verbal representation of all that transcends language. In this connection, we may appreciate the tacit but powerful expression of sorrow in a short poem by the Chinese poet Xin Qiji (1140-1207), who brilliantly makes use of the same device for achieving a different kind of purpose:

In my youth I didn't know
What sorrow tastes like.
Climbing up high,
Up the towers high,
To make lovely new lyrics,
I spoke of sorrow and dismay.

In old age too well I know
What sorrow tastes like.
Whenever I'd talk,

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[69] Shen Deqian (1673-1769), ed. Gu shi yuan [A Sourcebook of Ancient Poetry] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1977), p. 73.

I'd rather not talk;
"What a nice cool day"
Is all I can say.[70]

For the young man who does not know sorrow, melancholy is strictly rhetorical: it is just a stylistic gesture, a mere convention without real substance. But when old and weathered in adversity, when he has drunk sorrow to the lees, he would lose all interest in rhetorical maneuver and would not speak of sorrow, of which the depth of his knowledge can be measured only by the degree of his silence. The poet now, as Wordsworth says of his own adulthood experience, has learned "To look on nature, not as in the hour / Of thoughtless youth; but hearing oftentimes / The still, sad music of humanity."[71] For Xin Qiji, both "the still, sad music of humanity" and the experience of it are silent. The contrast in his poem between expression _of_ sorrow and silence _in_ sorrow reminds us once again of Laozi's paradox of the mutual exclusion of knowing and speaking, but by saying that he now no longer talks about sorrow, the poet frames the moment of silence in an evocative language. This framing of silence is of vital importance, for it is only against this verbal frame as presence that moments of silence as absence become charged with meaning. This is also the sig-

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[70] _Chou nu-er_ [in the tune of "The Ugly Maid"], in _Song ci xuan_ [Selection of _ci_ Lyrics from the Song Dynasty], ed. Hu Yunyi (Shanghai: Shanghai guji, 1962), p. 278.

[71] "Lines written a few miles above Tintern Abbey," 90-92, _The Oxford Authors: William Wordsworth_, p. 134.

nificance of what Barthes calls "appearance-as-disappearance." In Xin Qiji's poem, as in the works of Rilke, Mallarmé, Tao Qian and others, what is absent from the text is called into being by the act of naming and evocation, and once evoked, becomes more effective than explicit speech. In Keats's famous lines: "Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard / Are sweeter," do we not find the same principle?[72] Is it not the same idea that underlies Xin Qiji's short poem, which shows that expressed sorrow may be sad, but those unexpressed are even sadder?

The appreciation of suggestiveness and the sense of its superiority to explicit speech inform much of Chinese poetry and poetics. This is evident in the Chinese emphasis on hanxu or fruitful implicitness--the idea that the meaning of a poem should extend beyond the text, trying to get the maximum of effect in the minimum of words. The extreme economy of words is essential to Chinese poems, which are usually very short, and great Chinese poets are always masters of verbal economy. The works of Wang Wei (701-761), like those of Tao Qian, are acclaimed especially for effect of this kind. He can build up a certain mood or atmosphere in a few words, while pointing to a good deal of things outside the text, which the reader must bring into the picture. For example, homesickness is a topic almost every Chinese poet writes about, but Wang Wei's

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[72] Ode on a Grecian Urn, 11-12; Complete Poems, ed. Jack Stillinger, p. 282.

treatment of this topic stands out from all others by its peculiar understatement, its subdued voice that speaks of some small, familiar things which, once remembered, symbolize and personalize the abstract idea of home. The poem below is quite exemplary; it is the second poem in a group of three, entitled za shi [Miscellaneous Poems]:

> Coming from my home village, sir,
> You must know things over there.
> The day you left, by that window,
> Did the plum tree begin to flower?[73]

Here, the speaker of the poem meets with someone from his home village, and out of a million "things over there" he wants to know, he chooses only to ask about the plum tree by a certain window. All the rest is not mentioned, and yet, through this seemingly odd choice, he unfolds his tender feelings and fond memories which are always bound to something personal and concrete--like this old plum tree at home that blossoms in very cold days in early spring--something simple yet important that reminds him perhaps of someone special, of a particular moment or event in his life. Such small objects related to one's past would not mean as much to an outsider. In reading this poem, however, the reader is initiated, as it were, into the world of the speaker's personal memories and emotions, and allowed to share with him the private significance of the plum tree

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[73] Wang youcheng ji jianzhu [Works of Wang Wei], ed. Zhao Diancheng (1683-1756), 2 vols. (Shanghai: Zhonghua shuju, 1961), 1:255.

by that window. It is this initiation and the intimacy the reader feels that make the poem so lovely and charming. Thus the tree and the window acquire a private meaning, which the reader shares as an insider, convinced that there is something special about them. But what exactly is that private meaning? Why the speaker in this poem chooses to ask about that plum tree? What memories does it summon up? All these questions, though certainly relevant to the poem and its reading, are not even raised in the text; it is the reader who must raise these questions and find an answer in order to understand the poem and appreciate its special charm. Although every character in every line follows exactly the right sound pattern as demanded by the metrical rules, the poem as a whole is written in a casual, conversational kind of language, thus adding to the effect of closeness and intimacy. And with the last line posed as a question, it issues an irresistible invitation to interpretation. In a way, the special effect of this poem depends on its ability to imply questions and to invite interpretations.

But the poet does not have to include a question to invite interpretation. He may simply leave out the answer to the question the poem raises or supposedly replies. This is what Wang Wei does in his famous poem, <u>Chou Zhang shaofu</u> [A Reply to Assistant Magistrate Zhang]:

> In old age I value only tranquility;
> Nothing concerns my heart any more.
> For myself I have no suitable plan,

Except for retreating to the woods I know.
The wind in the pines blows to loosen my girdle,
The mountain moon shines as I pluck my lute.
You ask about the reason for life's ups and downs:
The fisherman's song echoes back from the shore.[74]

As a reply to a friend's inquiry about the philosophy of life, the poem never really gives an explicit answer. On the other hand, the poem does answer the question, but it does by enactment, not by argument, that is, by showing what the poet will do in facing life's ups and downs. The "fisherman's song" in the last line alludes to an ancient work called Yu fu or "The Fisherman," in which the poet Qu Yuan (4th century B. C.) met with an old fisherman on the edge of a river when he was unhappy and miserable, having suffered calumny at the hands of some mean courtiers, lost favor with his king, and been just banished from the court. The fisherman told him that a wise man should not abide by the world's condition of things, that he should just let the muddy current run its course. Qu Yuan declared that he would rather drown himself in the river than have his integrity tainted by the muddy world, "the fisherman smiled and paddled away, singing a song as he went:

When the waters in the Canglang are clear,
They can wash my hat's tassel;
When the waters in the Canglang are muddy,
They can wash my feet.

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[74] Ibid., 1:120.

Then he was gone and spoke no more."[75] Evidently, this philosophical fisherman is quite indifferent to the ups and downs in political life, the constantly changing court news: who loses and who wins, who's in, who's out. Apparently, Wang Wei not only adopts such an attitude for himself, but also gives it to others who come to him for advice.[76] By referring to the fisherman's song, the last line of his poem is a non sequitur to the question his friend asks, but it does imply a subtle answer which his friend, and by extension every reader, will have to find elsewhere, beyond the text. The meaning of Wang Wei's poem, as Chinese critics all agree, exists outside the words of the text.

Many critics have praised Wang Wei for his skilful use of implicitness, and the idea of having meaning outgrow the limits of the text is formulated as a principle in Chinese poetics. For example, an important stylistic and structural device in writing poetry, known as xing, which critics find difficult to define and often debate on its exact meaning, can nevertheless be broadly understood as a strategy to speak of two things in terms of indirect associations rather than direct comparison. Zhong Rong's definition of xing as the device

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[75] "Yu fu" [The Fisherman], in Chu ci jizhu [Annotated Edition of the Songs of Chu], ed. Zhu Xi (1130-1200) (Shanghai: Shanghai guji, 1979), p. 117.

[76] The same non-committal attitude, that "nothing can be suitable and nothing cannot be suitable," is also what Wang Wei recommends to a friend of his. See his "Yu Wei jushi shu" [Letter to Mr. Wei], Wang youcheng ji jianzhu [Works], 2:334.

to have "a surplus of meaning where words have come to an end" is not only one of the earliest, but also one of the most pertinent.[77] He does not single out this device as the most important one, but the idea of having meaning reaching beyond the text becomes a critical commonplace in Chinese poetics, and is incorporated into a whole line of poetic theory from Sikong Tu (837-908) to Yan Yu (1195?-1245?) and Wang Shizhen (1634-1711). The verse form of Sikong Tu's Twenty-Four Moods of Poetry is significant, for to write comments on poetry in the form of poetry reveals the author's attitude towards language, or his belief that the different kinds of poetic mood or style can best be shown by examples rather than explained in discursive language. Though there are twenty four poems for twenty four moods, the notion of poetry as a symbolic language constitutes the core of his thinking. For example, he uses the image of a gentle breeze brushing against one's clothes, something that appears to have a shape but disappears as soon as one holds it in hand, to symbolize the idea of "Lightness" (Chongdan) as a style of poetry. For "Naturalness" (Ziran), it is something picked up right at hand and not borrowed from neighbors, something not studied but created without effort, like the budding of flowers in early spring. And for "Tragic Pathos" (Beikai), the images he uses are a strong wind tossing

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[77] Preface to Shi pin [Ranking of Poetry], in Lidai shihua [Remarks on Poetry from Various Dynasties], ed. He Wenhuan, 1:2.

up waves and crushing forest trees, a warrior holding his sword in sorrow, dead leaves whirling down from the twigs, and raindrops falling on green moss.[78] The highly suggestive and ambiguous language of these poems makes Sikong Tu's meaning hard to grasp, but that in itself demonstrates precisely the effect he strives for. Of his twenty four poetic dictums, the most influential is the one on "Implicitness" (hanxu):

> Without putting down a single word,
> reap all the spirit and charm.
> Without speaking of one's self,
> it already bears too much sorrow.
> It has the True Master,
> with him to sink or float.
> Like wine overflowing the press,
> or flowers at the breath of autumn.
> Like dust dancing in the void,
> like foam sparkling over the sea.
> Shallow or deep, amassed or apart,
> All things be taken in the one.[79]

The poem and its imagery may be vague and elusive, but the idea of implicitness may somehow get across. The True Master in line five alludes to a phrase in the Zhuangzi: "As though they have a True Master, but there is no trace of him" (Z, ii, p. 27). The untraceable Master and the other images all point to the same idea, i. e., to achieve the poetic effect with as few words as possible, with each word implying a great deal of things. Poetry, according to Sikong Tu, should mean much

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[78] See Sikong Tu, Shipin jijie [The Moods of Poetry with Annotations], ed. Guo Shaoyu (Hong Kong: Shangwu, 1965), pp. 5, 19, 35.

[79] Ibid., p. 21.

more than what its actual words say, reaping all the spirit and charm without putting down a single word. As he told his friends, the taste of poetry is "beyond the salty and the sour," giving readers "a sense beyond the taste," "an image beyond the image" and "a scene beyond the scene."[80] In a word, the meaning and the beauty of poetry reside not so much in what is said as in what is implied by keeping silent. As a later critic Liu Xizai (1813-81) remarks: "All the wonder of regulated verse lies in places where there are no words. The turns and connections between two lines are all crucial spots of the poem."[81] Sikong Tu's poem on implicitness, especially the first two lines, may be said to have given the poetics of silence a most radical expression. This is, however, not an empty, but a framed silence. "To keep silent does not mean to be dumb," as Heidegger argues. "Keeping silent authentically is possible only in genuine discoursing. To be able to keep silent, Dasein must have something to say--that is, it must have at its disposal an authentic and rich disclosedness of itself."[82] Viewing Sikong Tu's poetic theory in the light of this Heideggerian notion of silence, Qian Zhongshu points out

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[80] "Yu Lisheng lun shi shu" [Letters to Mr. Li on Poetry], and "Yu Jipu dan shi shu" [Letter to Jipu on Poetry], ibid., pp. 47, 48, 52.

[81] Yi gai [The Principles of Art] (Shanghai: Shanghai guji, 1978), p. 73.

[82] Heidegger, Being and Time, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (London: SCM Press, 1962), p. 208.

that Sikong Tu's phrase "without putting down" should be taken to mean "without putting down more" or "without putting down again," and that the moment of silence, like the idea of blanc in Mallarmé and Claudel, or the blank space in Chinese landscape painting, is always framed in words, or in lines and colors.[83] It is important to emphasize this verbal frame, for the moment of silence would certainly lose its impact if there were no words in the background to set off its "appearance-as-disappearance."

The twelfth-century critic Yan Yu should be credited for making the poetics of silence most systematic and influential in the Chinese tradition. His Canglang's Remarks on Poetry is famous for borrowing the Buddhist term of Chan (Zen) to speak of poetry, though he was not the first to do so. The point of convergence between Chan and poetry, according to Yan Yu, is a kind of epiphany, the sudden insight into the nature of things, or the "miraculous enlightenment" (miaowu). One must meditate (can) on the best works of earlier poets, like a monk does on the meaning of Chan, before one can come to the sudden revelation of the secret of poetic art.[84] This sudden enlightenment or revelation does not come from the mere accumulation of knowledge, but from a long and intuitive process of medita-

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[83] See Qian Zhongshu, Tan yi lu [Discourses on Art], pp. 414-5.

[84] Canglang shihua jiaoshi [Canglang's Remarks on Poetry], ed. Guo Shaoyu (Beijing: Renmin wenxue, 1983), p. 12.

tion on ancient works. "Poetry," says Yan Yu in one of the most controversial passages of his work, "requires a different kind of talent, which has nothing to do with books; poetry requires a different kind of interest, which has nothing to do with reasoning. And yet one cannot attain to its highest point unless one reads extensively and reasons exhaustively. The superior kind is that which neither involves reasoning nor falls into the trap of words." The ideal kind of poetry, he goes on to say, should be "like music in the air, color in the features, the moon in water, an image in the mirror, with meaning reaching out to infinitude when words have come to an end."[85] In differentiating poetry from bookish knowledge and reasoning, Yan Yu is trying to grasp the essence of what makes poetry poetic, a problem with which modern Western literary theory is also much concerned. Notice that all the images and analogies Yan Yu uses to speak of poetry are things intangible and inaccessible, which have traces in the text but are themselves absent from the text. His concept of poetry reminds us of Sikong Tu's poetic dictum on implicitness, and his emphasis on the surplus of meaning echoes Zhong Rong's definition of <u>xing</u> as a device to generate indirect associations beyond textual boundaries. But Yan Yu is not alone in advocating the kind of poetry that does not "fall into the trap of words," with meaning "reaching out to infinitude when words have come

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[85] Ibid., p. 26.

to an end." Long before him, Mei Shengyu (1002-60) already expressed the view that a poet may be said to have achieved the consummation of art when he is able "to represent a scene, when it is extremely difficult to describe, in such a way that it seems to appear right in front of one's eyes, and to imply endless meaning that is perceived beyond words."[86] Yan Yu's contemporary, Jiang Kui (1155?-1221), a fine poet and musician who called himself the White-Stone Taoist, also says: "Language is valuable when it is implicit," and quotes Su Shi as saying that "The word that has an end but an endless meaning is the world's supreme word."[87] In some of his poems, Su Shi, like many other poets of his time, makes analogies between poetry and Chan, and he writes to a friend of his who is a Buddhist monk as well as a poet:

> If you wish for subtle words in verse,
> strive tirelessly for the void and quietude;
> for the quiet comprehends all motions,
> and the void admits of ten thousand worlds.[88]

Void and quietude are of course common Buddhist concepts; in adopting these terms, however, Su Shi is not just paying

[86] Quoted in Ouyang Xiu (1007-72), Shihua [Remarks on Poetry], Ouyang Xiu quanji [The Complete Works of Ouyang Xiu], 2 vols. (Shanghai: Shijie shuju, 1936), 2:1037.

[87] Jiang Kui, Baishi daoren shishuo [The White-Stone Taoist's Discourse on Poetry], in He Wenhuan ed., Lidai shihua [Remarks on Poetry from Various Dynasties], 2:681.

[88] "Song Shenliao shi" [To the Reverend Shenliao], Su Shi shiji [Collected Poems of Su Shi], ed. Wang Wengao. 8 vols. (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1987), 3:906.

homage to his cenobite friend, but expressing his own ideas on the art of poetry. Void and quietude are essential to the language of poetry precisely because they signify emptiness and stillness, thus having the great potential for imagination and enrichment, the ability to suggest all sorts of things. Such a use of Buddhist concepts can be seen as analogous to the way, as Jauss observes, the medieval aesthetic experience "tacitly adopted the Paulinian formula for the use of God's grace, `tamquam nihil habentes, et omnia possidentes' (as having nothing, and yet possessing all things, II Corinthians 6, 10)," as exemplified in Troubadour poets' glorification of the beauty of the inaccessible beloved.[89] The same principle underlies Homer's indirect sketch of Helen, Xin Qiji's reticence about sorrow, and indeed all poetic efforts that try to evoke the inexpressible by framing silence in language.

There are numerous other statements of similar ideas throughout the history of Chinese criticism, but I shall quote just one more example from the sixteenth-century poet and dramatist Tang Xianzu (1550-1616) who, like Yan Yu and others, conceives of poetry as comparable not only with the Buddhist notion of Chan, but also with the Taoist notion of tao: for all share the quality of mystery or obscurity, "all consider as beautiful that which appears to exist and to fade away at

[89] Jauss, Aesthetic Experience and Literary Hermeneutics, p. 9.

the same time."[90] The analogy between poetry and the mystic notion of Chan or tao, the intangible music or mirror-image as metaphors for poetry, the concept of meaning as residing in the blank space of poetic discourse and reaching beyond the boundaries of the text--all these are quite common in classical Chinese criticism. They may illuminate and be illuminated by many similar ideas in Western poetics when they are put together side by side, and their mutual illumination may throw some light on both critical traditions, leading to the conclusion that all texts, in Chinese as well as in Western poetry, are structurally open and necessarily call for the reader's active participation in fulfilling their aesthetic potentialities.

4. TOWARDS INTERPRETIVE PLURALISM

In his investigation of the history of aesthetic experience, Hans Robert Jauss outlines the gradual transformation of what he terms poiesis, i. e., the productive side of aesthetic experience, from its classical sense of the imitation of a model of perfection to its modern sense of creation which itself brings the perfect into being. The meaning of poiesis underwent a further and more radical change with the advent

[90] "Rulan yiji shu" [Preface to the Collection of Rulan's Works], Tang Xianzu shi wen ji [Collected Poems and Prose of Tang Xianzu], 2 vols. (Shanghai: Shanghai guji, 1982) 2:1062.

of the avant-garde art at the turn of the century, which broke away from classical aesthetic concepts and values, abandoning the perfect form and the idea of beauty as the aesthetic object for disinterested, contemplative admiration. For Jauss, Paul Valéry's aesthetic theory clearly illustrates this drastic change of poiesis. For the moderns, as Valéry maintains, "Beauty is a sort of corpse. It has been supplanted by novelty, intensity, strangeness, all the shock values. Raw excitement is the sovereign mistress of recent minds, and works of art are at present designed to tear us away from the contemplative state, the motionless delight, an image of which was at one time intimately connected with the general notion of the Beautiful."[91] A direct result of this radical change is the convergence of poiesis with aesthesis, i. e., the combination of the productive and the receptive sides of aesthetic experience. Avant-garde art, says Jauss, finds itself on a new course:

> And it frees aesthetic reception from its contemplative passivity by making the viewer share in the constitution of the aesthetic object: poiesis now means a process whereby the recipient becomes a participant creator of the work. This is also the simple meaning of [Valéry's] provocative, hermeneutically unjustifiably controversial phrase: "mes vers ont le sens qu'on leur prête" (my poetry has the meaning one gives it).[92]

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[91] Paul Valéry, "Leonardo and the Philosophers," Collected Works, 8:118. Quoted in Jauss, Aesthetic Experience and Literary Hermeneutics, p. 55.

[92] Jauss, ibid., p. 56.

The modern work of art becomes, in Valéry's term, an objet ambigu, which has at its essence such an indefinableness that its status as a work of art becomes problematic. With a front wheel of a bicycle mounted on a stool, Marcel Duchamp's Bicycle Wheel, for example, challenges not just traditional definitions of art and beauty but the very distinction between art and extra-artistic reality. It frustrates our conventional expectations so violently that as a work of art it poses a serious problem, an "identity crisis." Confronted with such an ambiguous object, the viewer, Jauss observes, "must ask himself and is called upon to decide whether this can still or also claim to be art."[93] Therefore, it is not so much the work's intrinsic quality or value as the viewer's attitude that establishes the ambiguous object as a work of art: "the paradoxical identity of work and reality," says Jauss, "places the actual poietic effort on the viewer."[94] This blurring of the boundary between art and extra-artistic reality and the ensuing demand for the viewer's poietic activity remind us of a similar ambiguity of literature and extra-literary reality as exemplified by a William Carlos Williams poem, on which Jonathan Culler made some comments in his Structural Poetics. The poem could very well be a simple note left on a kitchen table: "This is just to say I have eaten the plums which were

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[93] Ibid., p. 57.

[94] Ibid., p. 59.

in the icebox and which you were probably saving for breakfast. Forgive me, they were delicious: so sweet and so cold." When it is set down on the page with line break, wide margin, and all the typographic paraphernalia usually found in poems, however, it is no longer a note and, as Culler remarks, "the convention of significance comes into play."[95] In taking the note as a poem, the reader suspends its referential function as an ordinary piece of everyday language, and subjects it to a set of expectations usually related to fictive discourse, assuming that it signifies something different from and more profound than what it literally says. In this case, the note, somewhat like the bicycle wheel, contains an essential ambiguity of its status as art, and it is not so much the verbal artifice itself as the reader's attitude that establishes it as a poem. Besides formal patterns and linguistic deviation of verse, the most important factor that contributes to the production of "the true structure or state of poetry," Culler maintains, "is that of conventional expectation, of the type of attention which poetry receives by virtue of its status within the institution of literature."[96] Using a number of poems to illustrate his point, Culler specifies expectations of impersonality, totality, and significance as the most important conventions in reading poetry, arguing that once a

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[95] Culler, Structural Poetics, p. 175.

[96] Ibid., p. 164.

text is read as a poem, the reader would assume that it is not addressing a particular person in a real situation, but an instance of fictive discourse that has a total structure or coherent frame within which all the elements make sense. As the structuralists mostly work on narrative fiction rather than poetry, Culler's argument for a "poetics of the lyric" and a "phenomenology of reading" perhaps constitutes the most original chapter of his book as well as a significant contribution to literary theory.

After commenting on the Williams poem, Culler indicates that the operations of conventional expectations are not restricted to the reading of modern poetry. Indeed, this simple point needs to be emphasized, since modern poetry, with its radical disruption of classical norms and conventions, sometimes appears to be so completely alienated from tradition that any critical theory which deals with its avant-gardism may be seen as limited in scope and inapplicable to other, more "affirmative" types of writing. In his critique of a tendency in modern literature from Baudelaire, Flaubert to Robbe-Grillet and Beckett that gradually moves away from the classical aesthetics of representation to the modern aesthetics of perception, and related theoretical formulations from Valéry to Shklovsky and Bertolt Brecht that "too one-sidedly emphasized the innovative achievement of techniques of alienation as the highest aesthetic value," Jauss diagnoses the problem as lying in the modern "provocative overextension

of the poietic role of the reader."[97] Much of Jauss' critique of contemporary avant-garde literature and theory is valid, justifiable and to the point, but it would seem at least much exaggerated, if one pushes the opposition between tradition and the avant-garde, representation and perception, etc. to the extreme till it becomes a rigid dichotomy, and sees the "overextension" of the reader's poietic role in modern times as causing the collapse of "the cognitive and communicative efficacy of aesthesis."[98]

In this connection, it is helpful to consider Gadamer's effort to reappropriate contemporary avant-garde art to the changed paradigms of understanding. In The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays, one of the recurring themes is Gadamer's concern to propose a unifying "eidos or perspective from which we can describe and interpret contemporary art."[99] Instead of seeing the challenge of an ambiguous object as the "identity crisis" of contemporary art, Gadamer defines the work of art--any work of art--in terms of its "hermeneutic identity" which alone, he insists, constitutes the meaning of a work. "What gives the work its identity as work? What makes

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[97] Aesthetic Experience and Literary Hermeneutics, pp. 88, 87.

[98] Ibid.

[99] Gadamer, "The speechless image," The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays, p. 83.

this what we call a hermeneutic identity?" he asks, and then proceeds to answer:

> Obviously, this further formulation means that its identity consists precisely in there being something to "understand," that it asks to be understood in what it "says" or "intends." The work issues a challenge which expects to be met. It requires an answer--an answer that can only be given by someone who accepted the challenge. And that answer must be his own, and given actively.[100]

In other words, the reader's poietic role, his effort to interpret the meaning of the work, has always been constitutive of the very identity of the work. Using different readers' different perceptions of a staircase Dostoevsky sketches in The Brothers Karamazov as an example, Gadamer demonstrates how Ingarden's notion of concretization works; and it works, he maintains, not only in literature but also in visual arts, not only in traditional but also in avant-garde arts. It is not just Picasso and Braque and the other avant-garde artists that challenge the viewer to assume the responsibility of definition, for even a painting by Titian or Velazques would also require the viewer to "read" it word for word, as it were, till he understands the whole picture resonant with meaning. Therefore, "there is always some reflective and intellectual accomplishment involved," Gadamer observes, "whether I am concerned with the traditional forms of art handed down to us or whether I am challenged by modern forms of art. The challenge

[100] "The relevance of the beautiful," ibid., p. 26.

of the work brings the constructive accomplishment of the intellect into play."[101] Although Jauss' differentiation of aesthetic experience into poiesis, aesthesis, and catharsis helps clarify the different aspects of our experience of art, namely, the productive, receptive, and communicative efficacy, ultimately one must reassemble these three categories, restore them to their ontological oneness, and think of aesthetic experience as a totality or what Gadamer calls, somewhat elaborately, "aesthetic non-differentiation."[102]

To define a work of art in terms of its "hermeneutic identity" means, first of all, to recognize the presence of meaning in every work, and secondly, as a result, the presence of interpretation in every aesthetic experience. On the one hand, Gadamer argues that language must have meaning, and so must poetry, which is a "language-bound" art form. This is especially noteworthy in our own time, since contemporary art appears to assume, almost as a matter of principle, the abolition of meaning and the emancipation from an objectively interpreted experience of the world. But the poet, says Gadamer, cannot participate in that process: "Language as the medium and material of expression can never fully emancipate itself from meaning. A genuinely nonobjective poetry would simply be

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[101] Ibid., p. 28.

[102] Ibid., p. 29; see also TM, pp. 105 ff.

gibberish."[103] One may cite T. S. Eliot as a poet's endorsement of Gadamer's view when Eliot remarks that "the music of poetry is not something which exists apart from the meaning. . . Take an apparently extreme example--the nonsense verse of Edward Lear. His non-sense is not vacuity of sense: it is a parody of sense, and that is the sense of it."[104] Language is the institution of meaning, of which each word is recognized as a linguistic sign because it has already been assigned a meaning defined according to the conventional rules of a particular linguistic community. Insofar as a poem is written with linguistic signs--which is of course an essential feature of what we recognize as a poem in the first place--it cannot be without a certain meaning. On the other hand, however, Gadamer emphasizes the nature of art as a symbol, which is not a shell or container to be discarded once its meaning or signified is extracted. This is where art and theoretical reason differ from one another, for the language of art, unlike that of theoretical discourse, cannot be adequately translated into a language other than its own, and "the essence of the symbolic lies precisely in the fact that it is not related to an ultimate meaning that could be recuperated in intellectual terms.

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[103] "Composition and interpretation," The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays, p. 69.

[104] "The Music of Poetry," Selected Prose, p. 110.

The symbol preserves its meaning within itself."[105] Evidently, then, a work of art is not just meaningful, calling upon the viewer or the reader to interpret what it means, but is never fully interpreted, never exhausted of its meaning. In a work of art, as Gadamer notes, the meaning of what is said "always transcends what is expressed by what is said," the "inexhaustibility" of art depends on the fact that "the language of art means the excess of meaning that is present in the work itself."[106]

If Gadamer speaks of the "excess of meaning" as characteristic of art, and especially of poetry, is he not talking about something quite similar to what Sikong Tu describes as "a sense beyond the taste," "an image beyond the image," and "a scene beyond the scene"? Is he not pointing to the same inexhaustibility of meaning which, as Yan Yu describes, is "reaching out to infinitude when words have come to an end"? When a Chinese poet desires for zhiyin or "the one who knows the sound," he is expressing not only his wish to be understood but also his awareness of the extreme difficulty of knowing, since the meaning of his work flows over the boundary of the text and becomes utterly uncontrollable. The poet Du Fu writes:

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[105] Gadamer, "The relevance of the beautiful," The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays, p. 37.

[106] "Aesthetics and Hermeneutics," Philosophical Hermeneutics, pp. 101, 102.

> Literature is a matter of lasting importance,
> Its gain and loss are known to the inch of heart.[107]

He probably meant the inch of his own heart, but isn't it reasonable to assume that he also longed to be known in the reader's heart? When Milton undertakes to sing of creation and the loss of Paradise, he seeks to "fit audience find, though few."[108] There is evidently a sense of difficulty as well as the desire for understanding in such pronouncements. In a way, the poets themselves already conceive of their own works as incomplete unless properly understood by their readers at the far other end of a communicative process; they already know, in other words, that the identity of their work is essentially hermeneutic. It may thus be said that the poet's desire for zhiyin or "fit audience" already inscribes the reader in the poetic structure, and that it is only by gratifying that desire in concretization that a reader becomes the one the poet addresses. The "excess of meaning" suggests that the meaning of a literary work is not controlled by the author, that it overflows the boundaries the author has set for the text. The poet, Eliot remarks, "is occupied with frontiers of consciousness beyond which words fail, though meanings still exist. A poem may appear to mean very different things to different

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[107] "Ou ti" [Random Subject] Du Shaoling ji xiangzhu [Annotated Edition of the Works of Du Fu], 7:96.

[108] Paradise Lost, vii.31. Complete Poems and Major Prose, p. 346.

readers, and all of these meanings may be different from what the author thought he meant." Not only may the reader's interpretation differ from the author's and be equally valid, but it "may even be better." That formulation of the reader's poietic function does not seem to strike Eliot as unusual, for "The different interpretations may all be partial formulations of one thing; the ambiguities may be due to the fact that the poem means more, not less, than ordinary speech can communicate."[109] Perhaps we can understand Valéry's critical view in this context, especially the controversial phrase Jauss considers to be hermeneutically unsound, i. e., Valéry's claim that "My verses have the meaning attributed to them." Valéry may sound like an irresponsible relativist, but understood more sympathetically, this may prove to be his insight into the hermeneutic identity of poetry, his awareness of the inexhaustibility of meaning. "It is an error contrary to the nature of poetry, and one which may even be fatal to it," he says, "to claim that for each poem there is a corresponding true meaning, unique and conformable to, or identical with, some thought of the author's"[110] Valéry is not a theorist with a whole set of systematic aesthetic principles, but with the experience and sensibility of a poet, he is conscious of the

[109] "The Music of Poetry," Selected Prose, p. 111.

[110] "Commentaries on Charmes," Collected Works, 7:155-56.

incompleteness of his own work, so also of the reader's role in bringing his verses to completion.

It is Roman Ingarden who first systematically formulates the reading process as a process of concretization. His theory is further developed by the Czech structuralists, especially Jean Mukarovsky and Felix Vodicka. For Ingarden, the literary work is a schematic structure with spots of indeterminacy, but it is also, at least partially, objectively determined. In concretizing a literary work, the reader not only fills out spots of indeterminacy as the text allows, but he also does it frequently in a way "not in agreement with the positively determined objective moments." Therefore, Ingarden declares, "the literary work itself is to be distinguished from its respective concretizations, and not everything that is valid for the concretization of the work is equally valid for the work itself."[111] A work can be obscured for centuries by falsifying concretizations, "until finally someone is found who understands it correctly, who sees it adequately, and who in one way or another shows its true form to others."[112] It is to this last point--the belief in an ideal concretization--that the Czech structuralists take objection. Vodicka argues that "Ingarden presupposes an ideal concretization that would fully realize <u>all</u> the esthetic qualities of the work. To this, one

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[111] <u>The Literary Work of Art</u>, p. 252; see also p. 337.

[112] Ibid., p. 340.

can object that esthetic value does not have absolute validity. It is always closely related to the development of the esthetic norm, either coinciding with it or deviating from it."[113] As Striedter points out, in their semiotic understanding of the work of art as a sign composed of various signs on different levels, the Czech structuralists do not exclude any textual stratum from temporal change; on the contrary, they assume "the historic contingency of every structuring of the work as an aesthetic object on all its levels."[114] To be completely fair to Ingarden, however, one must admit that if he entertains the notion of an ideal concretization at all, he entertains it only briefly and quixotically, for he makes it very clear that

> the literary work is never _fully_ grasped in _all_ its strata and components but always only partially, always, so to speak, in only a _perspectival foreshortening_. These "foreshortenings" may change constantly, not only from work to work but also in one and the same work; in fact, they can be conditioned and required by the structure of the given work and its individual parts. On the whole, however, they are not so much dependent on the work itself as on the given conditions of the reading.[115]

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[113] Felix Vodicka, "The Concretization of the Literary Work: Problems of the Reception of Neruda's Works," trans. John Burbank, in _The Prague School: Selected Writings, 1929-1946_, ed. Peter Steiner (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982), p. 110.

[114] _Literary Structure, Evolution, and Value_, p. 124.

[115] _The Literary Work of Art_, p. 334.

Obviously, Ingarden here recognizes historical condition as the main reason why the same work can be concretized differently at different times.

The incompleteness of all understanding is one of the themes the Chinese poets and critics often comment on. Ouyang Xiu (1007-1072) provides a most revealing example by telling about his personal experience:

> When Mei Shengyu wrote poems, he took me as the only one who knew his sound, and I also said to myself that no one in this world could know Mei's poems better than I did. And yet when I once asked him to list his own best works, all the lines he recited for me were not those I liked. Therefore, I know that what one appreciates in a scroll may not conform to the author's original intention.[116]

If contemporaries and close friends like Ouyang and Mei, who were both great poets of the same period of time, could not reach the same point in terms of intentionality and aesthetic evaluation, how can anyone talk about reconstructing original intention or the horizon of original understanding with any assurance, after so much water has run under the bridge? If anything, anecdotes like this should serve as a reminder of the tentativeness of reception theory that tries to recuperate historical understanding of a literary work and to arrive at a vision of literary history on the basis of reconstructed horizons of expectations. What the Chinese critic emphasizes

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[116] "Tang Xue Ji shu" [The calligraphy of Xue Ji of the Tang Dynasty], Ouyang Xiu quanji [The Complete Works of Ouyang Xiu], 2:1155.

is the limitation of knowledge and perspective of each individual, the inexplicable vagaries of personal taste, and the changeableness of sense and sensibility. A well-known phrase in the appendix to the Book of Changes that marks out the limits of each finite apprehension of tao--"The benevolent sees it and calls it benevolence; the wise sees it and calls it wisdom"--forms a metaphysical background for the Chinese sense of hermeneutic difference.[117] With the authority of an ancient classic, this phrase often becomes an endorsement of critical opinions that attempt to relativize the power of predominant ideology in the Chinese tradition, arguing for the legitimacy of alternative views. A most delightful example of the subversive use of this phrase is Jin Shengtan's (1610?-1661) ingenious paraphrase of it in his defense of Xixiang ji [The West Chamber Romance], a famous play and love story which was accused of obscenity by orthodox moralists when it first occurred in the early seventeenth century. In his radical theory of reading, Jin Shengtan takes this literary work as one of the greatest books ever written, equal to the best of ancient classics. "The West Chamber is most definitely not an obscene book, but a wonderful work of literature," he argues in a passionate contention. "The literary sees it and calls

[117] Zhouyi zhengyi [The Book of Changes with Exegesis], 66a, in Shisan jing zhushu [Thirteen Classics with Annotations], 1:78.

it literature; the obscene sees it and calls it obscenity."[118] For him, this is a wonderful work because it contains every human emotion and every possibility of interpretation, and it contains all these, Jin Shengtan declares, by having written just a single word--"nothingness" (wu). Because of this "nothingness," which obviously carries a tone of Chan, the work speaks for everyone and belongs to everyone, and so does the commentary. That is to say, according to Jin Shengtan, it is the commentator and the reader that creates the text: "The text of The West Chamber on which Shengtan comments is Shengtan's text, not that of The West Chamber. And The West Chamber with Shengtan's commentaries which all the talented men on earth read is the text of all the talented men, not Shengtan's text."[119] It is interesting to see how the paraphrase of the famous line from the Book of Changes serves to legitimate Jin Shengtan's theory of reading, which really puts the reader on the position of creation. By paraphrasing the same source, another critic Xue Xue also points to the reader's different perspectives as the reason why Du Fu's poems seem to admit of so many different interpretations: "The martialists read it as the art of war; the Taoists read it as tao; and those who govern the state read it as politics. None of these readings

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[118] Jin Shengtan piben xixiang ji [Jin Shengtan's Version of The West Chamber Romance with Commentaries], ed. Zhang Guoguang (Shanghai: Shanghai guji, 1986), p. 10.

[119] Ibid., pp. 17, 21.

is invalid."[120] Statements like this, which are rather common in traditional Chinese criticism, become remarkable indicators of the sense shared by Chinese poets and critics concerning the hermeneutic identity of a literary work as well as the inevitable plurality of understanding and interpretation.

The reader's role in concretizing and actually shaping the text always poses a problem of relativism or subjectivism, or at least recognized as such, in the Western critical tradition. Ingarden is certainly concerned about this problem and tries to solve it by holding on to the schematic text which, despite its spots of indeterminacy, nevertheless contains "positively determined objective moments." Wolfgang Iser, who adopts Ingarden's views in a critical manner as the starting point for his own theory of aesthetic response, also argues that "However individual may be the meaning realized in each case, the act of composing it will always have intersubjectively verifiable characteristics."[121] Iser, in other words, remains committed to the objectively defined givens of textual schema, which serve to mark out the boundaries of legitimate individual readings. But it is precisely on this point that Stanley Fish takes issue with him in a critical debate. Fish

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[120] Yipiao shihua [Yipiao's Remarks on Poetry], in Qing shihua [Remarks on Poetry from the Qing Dynasty], ed. Ding Fubao (1874-1952), 2 vols. (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1963), 2:714.

[121] The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), p. 22.

argues that the very distinction Iser makes between textual givens and the reader's contribution is an assumption, that everything in Iser's account of the reading process--"the determinacies or textual segments, the indeterminacies or gaps, and the adventures of the reader's `wandering viewpoint'--will be the product of an interpretive strategy that demands them, and therefore no one of those components can constitute the independent given which serves to ground the interpretive process."[122] Fish does not, however, just remove intersubjectively verifiable characteristics from the text and makes the reader the sole creator of formal features of the text, for he proposes the concept of "interpretive community" as a sort of safeguard against subjectivism. In his theory, all textual features are made by the reader's interpretive strategies, but what seems to be "the rankest subjectivism," Fish maintains, "is qualified almost immediately when the reader is identified not as a free agent, making literature in any old way, but as a member of a community whose assumptions about literature determine the kind of attention he pays and thus the kind of literature `he' `makes.'" The last word, therefore, is not the reader's but belongs to the interpretive community which makes "a collective decision as to what will count as literature, a decision that will be in force only so long as a community

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[122] "Why no one's afraid of Wolfgang Iser," Diacritics 11 (no. 1 1981): 7.

of readers or believers continues to abide by it."[123] For Fish, the subject-object relation is quite a nuisance, and his excellent idea of interpretive community can help us get out of it, for the problem will no longer exist once we realize that the meanings a reader confers on texts "will not be objective because they will always have been the product of a point of view rather than having been simply `read off'; and they will not be subjective because that point of view will always be social or institutional."[124] In this respect, Fish's view is similar to that of the Czech structuralists.[125] Mukarovsky and Vodicka reject Ingarden's concept of textual schema as independent of various concretizations, regarding not only the concretization but also the aesthetic object itself as always changing and changeable, but they also avoid the charge of subjectivism by positing collective social relations as the condition of individual concretizations. For Mukarovsky, recognition of the reader's role does not lead to subjectivism because the aesthetic object is placed in "the collective consciousness," which puts individual aesthetic experience into a collective social context. With regard to individual evaluation and the aesthetic object, as Striedter observes,

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[123] Fish, "Introduction," Is There a Text in This Class? p. 11.

[124] Fish, "How To Recognize a Poem When You See One," ibid., p. 335.

[125] See Striedter, Literary Structure, Evolution, and Value, p. 165.

"Mukarovsky emphasizes the dependence of the individual reader (as well as the individual author) on norms and values shared by social collectives."[126]

The collective, social, institutional interpretive community is indeed an excellent idea that offers an explanation for both the agreement and disagreement in interpretation; it works as a necessary constraint, at least theoretically, in reader-response criticism, thereby absolving the critic from the charge of subjectivism. In this model of interpretation, the author and the text fade out; everything is determined by the reader, but everything the reader does is determined by the norms and assumptions of the interpretive community. In a very peculiar way, this later development in Fish's theory may remind us of the interpretive model he proposes in his earlier work, Surprised by Sin, in which Fish argues that the reading experience of Paradise Lost is a re-enactment of the Fall of man because the reader is likely to be led astray by Satan's specious rhetoric only to be rectified by the text itself, so it is also a process of the reader's education, a process of learning God's--and Milton's--teaching.[127] Now the reader in the interpretive community, like the prelapsarian Adam and Eve in their garden, is free to make whatever choice his interpretive strategies allow him to make, but he is free

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[126] Ibid., pp. 126, 158-59.

[127] See Fish, Surprised by Sin: The Reader in Paradise Lost (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971).

only because he is created so, or determined so, by the interpretive community which, like God, holds the true and only omniscience. The sinister side of this analogy is that God, of course, also holds the power to expel Adam and Eve from the Paradise. If this analogy is not unreasonable, the problem of Fish's theory becomes alarmingly obvious because whoever does not believe in God's foreknowledge and His predetermination of every human act and decision will have the same doubt about the tenability of the concept of interpretive community; and whoever believes in individual's right to make free choice will find that concept fraught with dangerous political implications. For example, Steven Mailloux already finds Fish's interpretive community analogous to the nightmarish totalitarian society of Oceania George Orwell describes in 1984, a collective community under a tight ideological control by the Party. He compares Fish with O'Brien, the Party's spokesman: "In the same way that O'Brien claims that the Party's collective mind creates reality," says Mailloux, "Fish argues that interpretive communities create what they claim merely to be discovering or describing."[128] The theoretical problem here is twofold: first, the nature of interpretation is not made clear by simply transferring the decisive power from the individual to a communal agency, and then, neither individual reader nor the interpretive community can simply decide what counts as

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[128] "Truth or Consequences: On Being Against Theory," in Against Theory, p. 67.

literature at random. There must be some reason for both individual and communal decisions, and that reason cannot be the reason if it is not independent of the decision. There is also the problem of change in socially defined aesthetic norms and hermeneutic horizons, which cannot be adequately explained internally, without taking into consideration challenges that come from outside the community and its collective mind. If the New Critics and the formalists are often blamed for taking the literary text as a self-contained autonomous entity in isolation of its social and historical milieu, it would be equally wrong for reader-oriented critic to assume that the reader or the community he belongs to can be a self-contained autonomous entity. If the reader is to respond at all, there must be something prior to and outside his interpretive conventions and strategies, something to which he can respond.

The conclusion seems self-evident: we do not have to eliminate the text and its formal features to recognize the role of the reader, nor do we have to conceive of the reader as locked in a prison of communal thinking. In fact, we do not need to exclude anything from contributing to the understanding of literature: the author, the text, and the reader all have their claims and specific ways of affecting the creation of meaning, which is a synthesis of all these claims, a combination or, in Gadamer's terms, the fusion of horizons. The reader is not only free to choose whatever interpretation he finds logically convincing and aesthetically appealing, he is

also free to take into consideration whatever is relevant to interpretation. In the Chinese tradition, the difference of understanding and interpretation appears to have been more readily acknowledged, accepted with greater tolerance, and relativism seems not such a bugbear every critic holds in abhorrence. Even the Confucian scholars, despite their moralistic tendency and intentionalist hermeneutics, also advocate a suggestive style and the economy of expression. Mencius himself says: "Words that speak of things near at hand but with far-reaching import are good words."[129] The Book of Changes, which is one of the Confucian classics, is praised for its conciseness, as it "names the small but implies the great; its import is far-reaching, its style is elegant, and its words are indirect but right to the point."[130] If the nature of language is recognized as essentially metaphorical, its way of expression indirect and symbolic, it is then only logical to infer that interpretation must be varied and flexible. Dong Zhongshu (176-104 B. C.), who was responsible for establishing Confucianism as the predominant orthodoxy in early imperial China, declared that "[The Book of] Poetry has no direct in-

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[129] Mengzi zhengyi [The Works of Mencius with Exegesis], 7b; p. 594.

[130] Zhouyi zhengyi [The Book of Changes with Exegesis], 77b, in Shisan jing zhushu [Thirteen Classics with Annotations], 1:89.

terpretation."[131] He made that claim at a time when Confucian scholars were trying hard to reinterpret ancient classics so that they could achieve a synthesis of ancient thoughts in the framework of Confucianism, and what Dong Zhongshu meant by that phrase was no more than a denial of more straightforward, literal interpretation of The Book of Poetry, which would then justify and set up the ground for allegorical interpretation of that first anthology of Chinese verse in terms of Confucian ethics and politics.

Nevertheless, once it is admitted that poetic language is not to be taken literally, a door is opened to various divergent interpretations. If that famous aphorism in The Book of Changes already testifies that the benevolent and the wise will have a different vision of tao, critics can always refer to it as the authorization of different readings. By the same token, Dong Zhongshu's phrase can also be used to justify the plurality of readings of all poetry, though originally he was speaking of one specific work, The Book of Poetry. Obviously, that is how Shen Deqian (1673-1769) understood Dong's phrase when he argued that readers of poetry should just immerse themselves in reading and not seek "a forced uniformity." Moreover, he continues to say, "the words of the ancients contain an infinitude of meaning, which is then experienced by posterity in various ways as according to their different

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[131] Chunqiu fanlu [The Dew of Spring and Autumn] (Shanghai: Shangwu, 1926), p. 6b.

dispositions, shallow or deep, high or low. . . . This is what Master Dong meant when he said that poetry has no direct interpretation."[132] Since meaning is infinite, the reading of poetry also has many different possibilities. In the works of Wang Fuzhi (1619-1692), the role of the reader is also clearly acknowledged. By citing different interpretations of some ancient poems as a model, Wang Fuzhi argues for the legitimacy of such hermeneutic difference, emphasizing the importance of emotion and aesthetic pleasure. "Readers find in the author's one single intent whatever is in keeping with their own dispositions," says Wang. "There is no limit to the possible permutations of human emotion, but each reader can find in poetry what suits his emotion; and that is precisely the value of poetry."[133] The idea underlying all these critical opinions is a very open-minded acceptance of different readings so long as these readings come from real enjoyment, as the result of aesthetic pleasure. Xie Zhen (1495-1575), writing very much in the same vein as Tao Qian's Mr. Five Willows, declares boldly: "Of poems some can be understood, some cannot, and some need not be. They are like the moon in water or flowers

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[132] Tang shi biecai [A Selection of Tang Poetry]. 4 vols. (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1964), 1:1.

[133] Jiangzhai shihua jianzhu [Annotated Jiangzhai's Remarks on Poetry], ed. Dai Hongsen (Beijing: Renmin Wenxue, 1981), pp. 4, 5.

in a mirror, just don't trace every line too doggedly."[134] Of course, this does not mean to abandon critical responsibility, but it does express the spirit of tolerance and enjoyment as well as a kind of aesthetic relativism, which sees the plurality of interpretation as a matter of necessity. Nothing should be excluded from understanding and interpretation, the reader should not only be free to choose whatever is available to him but also free not to choose, and be allowed to declare his enjoyment without thorough understanding--all these may perhaps be said to represent a typically Chinese eclectic attitude which, in the context of many debated issues about author, text, and reader in contemporary Western literary theory, may perhaps open some new vistas on the critical scene by virtue of its very open-mindedness.

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[134] Siming shihua [Siming's Remarks on Poetry] in Ding Fubao ed., Lidai shihua xubian [A Sequel to Remarks on Poetry from Various Dynasties], 3 vols. (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1983), p. 1137.

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